

ROAD TO BANGLADESH SERIES

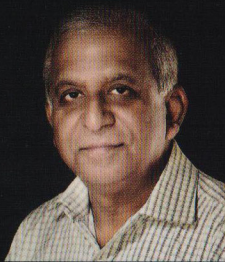


# BITTERSWEET VICTORY

## A FREEDOM FIGHTER'S TALE



A. QAYYUM KHAN



A. Qayyum Khan joined the *Mukti Bahini* in the early days of the liberation war when he was a university student. He was commissioned during liberation war and fought in Sector 7 as a second lieutenant. After leaving the Bangladesh Army in 1981, he went to the US and completed his doctorate in finance from Georgia State University. He taught in several American universities and returned to Bangladesh in the late nineties. His research and academic writings have appeared in the *Financial Review*, *International Journal of Finance*, and the *Journal of the International Academy of Case Studies* among others. He currently lives and works in Dhaka.

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ROAD TO BANGLADESH SERIES is designed to present published accounts of the background to the emergence of Bangladesh. The Series showcases such a collection that, when put together, achieves a well-rounded narrative of the events of 1971. Books in the series should be an invaluable collection for those interested in Bangladesh affairs, politics, history, development and social transformation.

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Nineteen seventy-one left an indelible impression on all Bengalis as indiscriminate massacre, destruction and personal experiences intertwined inextricably. The book combines personal recollections, key historical events, and commentary, in lucid and simple language. Pakistan's history leading up to 1971 is described through the eyes of a young student. First-hand description of the crackdown highlights how the author and his family cope with the army's brutality. There is a fairly elaborate description of the early days of the *Mukti Bahini*, its trials and tribulations and how ordinary civilians were turned into guerilla fighters in a matter of weeks.

The dramatic accounts of engagements by the combatants of Sector 7 make the battlefield come alive. The book highlights the exceptional role played by Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed, an unsung hero of Bangladesh's struggle for independence. There are other points that the author makes including the ease with which freedom fighters of the *Gono Bahini* were cast aside. The memoir ends with the challenges and the difficulties faced by the new republic.

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# **Bittersweet Victory**

## **A Freedom Fighter's Tale**

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মুক্তিযুদ্ধ ই-আর্কাইভ ট্রাস্ট  
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মুক্তিযুদ্ধের ইতিহাস হোক উন্মুক্ত

Dedicated to

The shaheeds of 1971,  
combatants of the *Mukti Bahini*  
and the Indian Defense Forces  
who fought the Bangladesh Liberation War;  
the *Biranganas*  
and  
those brave people of Bangladesh  
who risked everything to help the *Mukti Bahini*  
to victory

## Lines on the Massacres in East Pakistan March 1971 (Bangladesh II)

Faiz Ahmed Faiz\*

Translation: Agha Shahid Ali

This is how my sorrow became visible:  
in dust, piling up for years in my heart,  
finally reached my eyes,  
the bitterness now so clear that  
I had to listen when my friends  
told me to wash my eyes with blood.  
Everything at once was tangled in blood –  
each face, each idol, red everywhere.  
Blood swept over the sun, washing away its gold.  
The moon erupted with blood, its silver extinguished.  
The sky promised a morning of blood,  
and the night wept only blood.  
The trees hardened into crimson pillars,  
All the flowers filled their eyes with blood.  
And every glance was an arrow,  
each pierced image of blood. This blood –  
a river crying out for martyrs –  
flows on in longing. And in sorrow, in rage, in love.  
Let it flow. Should it be dammed up,  
there will only be hatred cloaked in colours of death.  
Don't let this happen, my friends,  
bring all my tears back instead,  
a flood to purify my dust-filled eyes,  
to wash this blood forever from my eyes.

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\* Faiz Ahmed Faiz was imprisoned by the Yahya regime in 1971 for protesting the killings of unarmed Bengalis and other atrocities of the Pakistan Army against the people of Bangladesh.

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## Preface

I returned to Bangladesh in the late nineties after almost two decades in the US. When I had left Bangladesh in 1981, the country did not have a garment/textile industry, there were no private banks, private universities, private television and radio stations, scores of newspapers, and microcredit hadn't quite acquired the international fame that it has today. These developments had occurred in the intervening period. By the end of the nineties, our children who were beginning pre-school in the early eighties were entering universities. Whenever my nieces introduced me to their friends they never forgot to mention "*Mama* (maternal uncle in Bengali) is a *Muktijhodha*". I sensed their pride. Occasionally, someone would even ask me a few questions about the liberation war. Talking to these young men and women, I couldn't help but feel that the true history of the liberation war had become a casualty of contemporary politics. Since 1991, elections in Bangladesh drove out the incumbent and with that came a new twist on the historical description of Bangladesh's birth suiting the political powers of the day. Even school textbooks were rewritten. This is unfortunate.

I had a similar experience when I was teaching at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, but that was with Pakistani students. As a Finance Faculty, I got to see undergraduates only in their junior and senior years. Given my name, many Pakistani students thought that I was from Pakistan, which was not entirely false; for the first twenty years of my life I was indeed a Pakistani citizen. Some of them chose me as their academic advisor. The advisement sessions were one on one. In our discussions, the liberation war and the independence of Bangladesh would invariably come up. A question that I would always ask my Pakistani students was what did (s)he learn about 1971, the breakaway of East Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in their secondary schools. Most were forthright and many stated that "East Pakistan was massively infiltrated by Indian military personnel in civilian clothes and they started the trouble to break up Pakistan". Some of them even said that the genocide in East Pakistan was done by the Indians; Hindus killed Muslims. Majority of the Pakistani students did not even know that it was the people of East Bengal who had voted overwhelmingly for the

creation of Pakistan. Had they not done so, there would be no Pakistan. Goebbels was right; tell a big lie and repeat it often and even you shall start believing it.

Much of political history is about war and conquests. Mainstream history, therefore, presents the dominant view of the victor, the affluent and the influential<sup>1</sup>. The experience of the vanquished, the weak and ordinary is seldom documented and studied. After the second world war, Winston Churchill assured his Tory peers, "History will be kind to us, gentlemen, for I plan to write it". Churchill wrote the history of the second world war but his version was essentially his version; the way he wanted history to be presented. There is very little in Churchill's writings about his own acquiescence of the Nazis for taking on the Russian Bolsheviks.

In 1971, as a young man of twenty, I found myself at the crossroads of history. I wasn't involved in student politics, although I participated in many political events at that time because those events coincided with my own aspirations. Like most citizens of a democratic country, I support certain political views and those views do not necessarily come from one political party. Therefore, I don't have any predilection for a particular version of history as long as it is not based on falsehoods or it doesn't gloss over significant events simply because it doesn't fit the writer's vested interests.

Most of the events that led to the liberation of Bangladesh happened around me; I was an active participant in many including being a combatant in the *Mukti Bahini*. Nevertheless, I was a 'small man' and did not figure in the bigger canvas; whatever happened in that stage affected me. The liberation war was not a conflict limited in scope to the subcontinent only; the superpowers of the day and the United Nations had important roles as well.

This is not a history book. Historical references are only circumstantial. This is my memoir of that seminal year, 1971. I try to capture the times and describe what I witnessed and felt. At the time when these events were unfolding, I did not know the details

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<sup>1</sup> Micheal Parenti, *History as Mystery*, San Francisco: City Light Bookstores, 1933, makes the case for contrarian history.

of many of the political developments of the day; I had only heard murmurs. The book covers everything that is good and bad about the liberation war. If I am to be pigeonholed, then it must be as a combatant of the *Mukti Bahini* and nothing else. At the same time, the reader should also remember that the *Mukti Bahini* was not a monolithic group; there was considerable divergence of views amongst *Muktijhodhas*.

The book does not end with the defeat of the Pakistan Army and the creation of Bangladesh. I cover the initial and formative months of the new republic. I end the book in the first half of 1973 after the adoption of the republic's constitution and its first election. I intend to write on the first decade of Bangladesh's independence separately; hopefully it shouldn't take too long.

I had been planning to write my memoirs of the liberation war for the past few years but it was only an idea; I hadn't put anything down on paper. No one in my family or my circle of friends had ever heard my 1971 story. My only regret is that I did not write this book when my parents were alive. Alas, they will never know.

One day, my friend Ishrat Firdousi (Chunnu), the author of *The Year That Was*, a collection of individual experiences during 1971 across a wide spectrum, came to see me. I had read his book. He had interviewed many of my friends and their stories appear in the book. He was expanding the second edition and wanted to interview me. When he learnt that I was planning to write a book on 1971, Chunnu became my principal source of encouragement and motivation. He recorded my interview and a few weeks later brought me a transcript of about thirty pages. The transcript, thus, became the embryo for the book. Over the next six months, Chunnu periodically checked on the progress of my writing. He read every chapter several times enthusiastically and made valuable editorial and style suggestions. He deserves a very special mention for his efforts.

In this memoir, I tell my personal story along with a discussion of important historical events and facts. Wherever appropriate, I add my personal commentary. Whenever I use secondary sources, appropriate references are cited in footnotes. Italics are used in the text either to show long quotations or non-English words and phrases. Dhaka and Kolkata are spelled as "Dacca" and "Calcutta"

throughout the book as was the practice at that time. I try to bring out the important historical facts without any embellishment. At the same time, I strive not to shy away from potentially difficult issues. I have a point of view and I mention them when necessary. As a writer, my task is to bring out the relevant facts and let the reader make conclusions. The annexures are reproduced in their original.

Kaiser Haq, a fellow freedom fighter from Sector 7, made important suggestions on content and style. I am grateful to him. Syed Mahmud Ali, a fellow officer in 3 East Bengal in the mid-seventies, read the manuscript and encouraged me. He made important suggestions on certain historical events that sharpened the text. I owe him a very special thank you. Habibul Alam, a friend from elementary school days, helped me relive our journey across the border and our early days in the *Mukti Bahini* camp in Motinagar. His suggestions were valuable and I thank him. Naila Khan, a comrade from Sector 7, has been a source of inspiration. She had heard me speak on the liberation war a couple of times and felt that I have a story that needs to be told. I thank her for stirring my interest.

Many friends and relatives read the manuscript and made important suggestions that only improved the text. I am grateful to them. The list includes Khalid Shams, Sultan Hafizur Rahman, Ali Ahmed Ziauddin, Ardashir Kabir (Titu), Ashek Elahi, Kazi Ashfaq Ahmed (Kochi), Firdous Azim, Zulfiquar Rahman (Rana), Shahidullah Khan (Badal), Sonia Nishat Amin, Jahangir Khan, Didar A. Hussain, my sister Sayeeda Roxana Khan (Shikha) and my son Asad Khan. I thank Paul Gilbert for his painstaking copy editing. I must acknowledge Kamal Hossain, my personal assistant, for his secretarial assistance in retyping historical documents. Khaleda Khatoon deserves special mention for her suggestions and for bearing with me when I was writing this manuscript. However, I am responsible for any errors or inaccuracies.

## Abbreviations

ADC	Aide de Camp
AIR	All India Radio
AMC	Army Medical Corps
ASC	Army Services Corps
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BDF	Bangladesh Forces
BDR	Bangladesh Rifles (Currently known as Border Guard Bangladesh or BGB)
BOP	Border Outpost
BSF	Border Security Force
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CO	Commanding Officer
DC	Deputy Commissioner
DQ	Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General
DUCSU	Dacca University Central Students Union
EPCAF	East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces
EPR	East Pakistan Rifles
EPSU	East Pakistan Students Union
FDL	Forward Defensive Line
FOO	Forward Observation Officer
HMG	Heavy Machine Gun
HQ	Headquarter
ISI	Inter Services Intelligence
JCO	Junior Commissioned Officer
JRB	Jatiya Rakhi Bahini
JSD	Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal
LMG	Light Machine Gun
MCO	Movement Control Officer
MFC	Mobile Fire Controller
MMG	Medium Machine Gun
MNA	Member of National Assembly
MP	Military Police or Member of Parliament
MPA	Member of Provincial Assembly
NCO	Non Commissioned Officer

NSF	National Students Front
OC	Officer in Charge
OP	Observation Post
PECHS	Pakistan Employees Cooperative Housing Society
PMA	Pakistan Military Academy
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PS	Police Station
RMS	Residential Model School
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing
SDO	Sub-Divisional Officer
SLR	Self Loading Rifle
SP	Superintendent of Police
TCB	Trading Corporation of Bangladesh
SSG	Special Service Group
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
VOA	Voice of America

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## East Pakistan

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My paternal grandfather was alive when I was born but he passed away when I was only four. I don't remember anything about him. I heard stories of our family and ancestry from my father, uncles and aunts. We are the progeny of one Dost Mohammad Khan, a military officer of central Asian ancestry in Shah Shuja's army. Shuja was then the *Subahdar* (Governor) of Bengal. Shuja's father, Shah Jahan, was the emperor of India. Prince Aurangzeb imprisoned his father, and a war of succession broke out in the Mogul Empire. Shuja fought a few battles against his brothers which he lost. Eventually, Aurangzeb defeated the other aspirants to the throne and summoned Shuja to Delhi. Fearing the wrath of his brother, Shuja decided to go to Akyab on the other side of Arakan Hills (now Myanmar) with his army. Akyab was a Muslim area. Though many left with him, not everyone in Shuja's army saw any future in Akyab and many soldiers stayed back in Bengal. Dost Mohammad Khan decided to settle down in Bikrampur.

Dost Mohammad Khan was an educated man. There were always men of letters in the family. My great grandfather, Taifur Khan, passed away relatively young even before his oldest child, my grandfather, Golam Najaf Khan, could finish his education; he had only passed his First Arts (F.A.) examination (equivalent to Higher Secondary Certificate in today's terms). My grandfather had to take responsibility of his two younger brothers. With the education he had, he entered the police service as an assistant sub inspector. He served mainly in East Bengal and was Officer-in-Charge (OC) of many different Police Stations (PS). He retired in



the 1930s and his last assignment was OC, Lalbagh PS in Dacca. His younger brother, Abdul Jalil Khan, joined the Bengal Civil Service and his last job in the Bengal Government was Director General of Industries. He too retired before partition.

My grandmother was from Narayanganj. Her father was a businessman. My grandfather wanted to raise his family in his ancestral village of Rarikhal in Bikrampur but that was not to be because of a tragedy. In her second pregnancy, my grandmother lost the child. After the trauma of this loss, she prevailed on her husband to migrate to Dacca where she would have access to doctors and hospitals. So my grandfather sold his property in the village and moved to Dacca in an area called Khaje Dewan in Lalbagh. Eventually, my grandmother had seven sons and four daughters. My father, Abdul Mayid Mohammad Khan<sup>1</sup> was one of the youngest with just two siblings after him. He was a good student and that made him a favourite of his parents. He was also a bit temperamental. One evening, shortly after he had passed his Intermediate of Science (I.Sc.) examination, he found some fault with his bed – his mosquito net had not been put up on time. In a huff, he left home and joined the Royal Indian Air Force as an airman (ground crew). However, he couldn't stand the military and deserted. This was a serious offense in wartime. For obvious reasons he could not live in Dacca any more and was packed off to Barisal where his sister and brother-in-law lived. There, he enrolled in BM College, under Calcutta University where he studied the sciences. After the Second World War ended he moved back to Dacca and completed his M.Sc. in chemistry from Dacca University.

I was born in Khaje Dewan. My childhood memories are of a joint family where my grandmother was the matriarch who presided over family matters. Her daughters-in-law assisted her in household affairs. She had her own way of doing things. For instance, a lot of emphasis was paid on food which followed from the Bikrampur days. The cuisine had however become a lot more urban. Some of her sons-in-law were officers in the British Indian government and had become little brown sahibs who used forks

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<sup>1</sup>He was known as A. M. M. Khan.

and knives at the dining table. The food was always good. One of my grandmother's maxims was that you judged a family by the quality of their food. A common riposte about people whose cooking didn't meet her standards was, "Oh, these village cretins! They know nothing!"

We didn't make too many trips to our ancestral home because of inconvenient communication. Today, it's only an hour by car but in those days it took the whole day when we had to take a motor launch from Sadarghat to Munshiganj and then to our village by country boat.

The house in Khaje Dewan was big. It had a large compound with palm trees along the boundary wall. There was a detached *boitok-khana* (assembly room/meeting place). If junior members of the family indulged in too much naughtiness, the erring kid would be locked up in the *boitok-khana* for an hour. I seemed to spend more time there than the others.

I don't have any recollection of my father from my earliest memories. He had gone away to the London School of Pharmacy in 1953 after my sister, Shikha, was born and I was only a year and half old. For Shikha and I, father was only a photograph. The first time we saw him was in 1955 when he returned to Dacca after finishing his doctorate. It was a moment of great joy for all of us. Shortly afterwards, he left to take up a position with Glaxo in Karachi. Later that year, we joined him.

Life in Karachi was completely different. For starters, there were no relatives. We sorely missed the love and affection of the joint family and most of all we missed our playmates who were our cousins. The place where we first put up was a furnished apartment complex owned and managed by an Anglo Indian family. It had a large walled compound with a huge lawn that was perfectly manicured throughout the year. The garden was beautifully landscaped with large hardwood trees, bushes, shrubs and flowering plants. There were about a dozen or so one-storey row homes. Ours was a two-bedroom unit. The residents socialized in the common ante-room and had their meals in the common dining room. There were many rules such as one had to be properly attired to enter the ante room and dining room. Also, everyone ate within the fixed meal times. The cuisine was of the

continental or Raj variety and pretty soon we started missing Bengali food. At one point, my mother rebelled and wanted to cook for her family. So, after some consultation with the landlord it was agreed that she could cook once or twice a week. We loved it. Weekends were great when we ate Bengali food and usually had other Bengali friends of my parents as guests. Obviously, fish was an important item in the menu that included *Muroghonto*, a preparation of fish head and lentils, which most Bengalis simply love. Whenever she made this dish, she had the cooks of the main dining room help her. Pretty soon, the children in the apartment complex started teasing my sister and me saying, *Bangalee machli ka sir khate hein!* (Bengalis eat fish head).

At first, Shikha and I knew only Bengali so communication was difficult. Within a short time, both of us learnt to speak English and Urdu. We started school in Karachi. I do not remember much about the kindergarten we went to except that Shikha and I were in different classrooms. She would often come to my classroom and refuse to leave. We did not have many friends in that school because Bengalis were considered different. So, when my father had to go to England again for training, both Shikha and I were happy to return to Dacca with our mother.

We returned to Karachi after the completion of my father's training. This time around, we rented a second floor flat in a two-story building in PECHS<sup>2</sup> opposite the Tayeba Masjid. PECHS was a nice area and probably the first planned housing society in Karachi with good amenities. Shikha and I were enrolled in an English-medium school in PECHS which was much bigger than the primary school we had attended earlier. There was assembly everyday before classes where a student would lead the singing of the national anthem. Neither Shikha nor I had ever heard the national anthem of Pakistan before and we were quite amused at this strange song whose words we did not understand. Every morning we sang it with the other kids although I did not quite learn the lyrics. One day, it was my turn to lead the singing. Sure enough, I made mistakes, much to the embarrassment of my teacher. For the next couple of days, she took special care to teach

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<sup>2</sup> Pakistan Employees Cooperative Housing Society.

me the lyrics which I eventually mastered. During one of those sessions, I asked her the meaning of the words. She confessed she did not understand them herself since the language was not Urdu but Persian.

My parents decided to return to Dacca after the arrival of our new sibling who was expected in January 1959. The family was in high spirits at the prospect of returning to Dacca. Although Karachi was a bigger city with better civic amenities than Dacca, it never became a home for us. In the last week of February, 1959, my parents, Shikha, our new born brother, Opoo and I boarded a Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) Super Constellation for Dacca. I had just turned seven in December and Shikha six the previous month.

In Dacca, for the first few days we lived with my uncle and his family in the Topkhana Road area. The house was packed with kids and everyone was happy to see Opoo who was only a month and a half old. Those days, Topkhana Road had a row of restaurants that played popular Bengali songs on the gramophone. Although one could not make out any of the songs because of the cacophony of four blasting loudspeakers, the music certainly created an atmosphere of gaiety and it made us very happy. Whenever we found some loose change we would run to these restaurants to buy *boundia* or *jilabee*, our favourite desserts.

We had friends and family all over the city. Dacca was our home and we belonged here. At that time, every neighbourhood had several ponds and open spaces where children played. It was green throughout the year. Dacca had monsoon and its accompanying rain; something that seldom happened in Karachi. The summer months were considerably cooler than Karachi.

Soon, my father found work in Dacca and we moved to a rented house in Siddeshwari near the *Kali Mandir*. Siddeshwari was a beautiful area. Every house was independent, with large yards and beautiful gardens. Our house shared common boundary walls with the Haques and the Siddeshwari Boys School. Mrs. Haque's brother, Zakir Hussain, was the Governor of East Pakistan and occasionally his Cadillac would come to fetch her. The Haques had a boy my age, Mainu, and we became good friends<sup>3</sup>. They had a

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<sup>3</sup> We continue to be friends to this day.

large pond where I learnt to swim. Siddeshwari was very different from PECHS. Children moved around easily, everyone seemed to know each other and we called our elders *Khala* or *Khalu*. We were also welcome to visit any house. My mother made friends with most of the ladies in the neighbourhood and they would visit each other when the husbands were at work and the children in school.

The *Kali Mandir* was an interesting place. The priest's family had children and I became friends with the boy, Amrita, who was about my age. I had never been inside a Hindu temple before and I was fascinated by the deities and the rituals. Although Muslims were not allowed inside, whenever Amrita's father or his older brothers were not around, I would persuade him to let me enter the main worship area of the *Mandir*. He always seemed a little anxious lest his father or brothers found out. One day, his father saw me inside the temple and Amrita became very nervous. However, the old priest did not admonish his son. Instead, he showed me around. Thereafter, nobody objected to my entering the temple.

Every winter, throughout the Bengali month of *Poush*, the *Kali Mandir* would hold a *Mela* (fair) every Sunday which was great fun for us. Vendors would set up stalls right outside our gate and we did all the things children do at such events with one major variation; we did not have adult supervision.

Shikha and I enrolled in a small English medium preparatory school in Siddeshwari and we would walk to school and back without any accompanying adults. Habibul Alam (Alam) was my classmate in this school<sup>4</sup>. The area between Bailey Road, Siddeshwari, outer Circular Road (Mouchak) and Viquaranessa School was our playground. We roamed the place freely with friends and our parents did not consider it unsafe. I would sometimes use my slingshot on small birds or whatever else that took my fancy. Inevitably, my mother would get reports of my mischief from neighbours. Shikha would cover for me as best as she could.

One of the principal reasons for returning to Dacca was my father's desire to start his own pharmaceutical manufacturing

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<sup>4</sup> He remained my class mate throughout my school life as both of us landed in Residential Model School (RMS) from where we finished our Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam. Alam and I joined the liberation war together and he remains one of my dearest friends.

company. He felt that his education, training and professional experience gave him the knowledge and skills to undertake this entrepreneurial venture. However, he needed investors and it was unlikely that he would find any in Karachi. By the end of 1959, he found a group of people willing to invest in his ideas. In 1960, he along with his business associates started Pharmapak Laboratories. The same year, he started construction of a house for his family in Testuri Bazar in Tejgaon, Dacca<sup>5</sup>. The early sixties was probably the busiest period in my father's life. Family affairs were my mother's domain.

It was around this time that my mother learnt that the central government was starting an English medium boarding school called Residential Model School (RMS) in Mohammadpur which was then the outskirts of Dacca. My parents decided that it would be best if I went to this school. This would allow my mother to devote more time to the other children. I was only eight and going to a boarding school was quite a radical idea for someone that young, although I wasn't at all unhappy. One day, shortly afterwards I accompanied my parents to the school. The campus was huge with most of the buildings along the perimeter. The sports fields were in the open spaces in the middle of the campus. The place was surrounded by a brick boundary wall. There were several clumps of trees that added to the beauty of the campus. Classes would start in May 1960. I could not wait to get started.

The next couple of days I went with my mother to the New Market where she procured everything I needed. My grandmother was not at all happy that I was going away to a boarding school at such a young age. On the appointed day, my parents left me in the school after a walk through the dormitories and other facilities. Other parents were doing the same with their wards and my parents seemed to know some of them. By dusk, most of the parents were gone and the boys were on their own. At dinner time, we all went to the dining hall, stood behind our chairs and together said "*Bismillah-he-Rahmanur-Rahim*" aloud before we sat down to eat. One had to remain seated till everyone was done. Then, we all rose together, chorused: "*Shukkur-Alhamdulliah*", and exited. This would be routine for every meal.

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<sup>5</sup> Both my parents lived in this house till their demise.

Classes started the next day. The school had excellent teachers; most had double master degrees, one being in education. In the junior wing, most of the teachers were females except for the art teacher and the physical education teachers. Sports and extra-curricular activity set Residential Model School apart from other schools in the province. The emphasis in these areas was similar to that of academics. Every student had to participate in all sports activities. Extra-curricular activities included music, theatre, public speaking and debating. At the end of every school year, there would be an annual prize distribution ceremony where almost every student was recognized for some achievement or the other. The highlight of this event was the sumptuous refreshments that followed where parents and families were invited.

Although it was not a military school, everything was structured and regimented. The first principal was Major M. M. Rahman from the Army Education Corps. He was a Bengali<sup>6</sup>. Typically, principals would come from the Army Education Corps although there were notable exceptions. One was Dr. Quazi Nurul Haque who happened to be the brother of Ayub Khan's education minister. The objective of the school was to make good Pakistanis out of every student who were all-rounded with the expectation that some day these boys would take up leadership positions in East Pakistan. National Integration was emphasized. Once a year, we would have visiting student and teacher delegations from similar schools in West Pakistan and there would be sports tournaments, cultural performances and similar activities.

Most students were from middle class families and in every class, out of the thirty odd, three or four were non-Bengalis. Use of vernacular in conversations was discouraged although vernacular was widely spoken whenever teachers were not around. Urdu speaking students spoke to us in Urdu or English but never in Bengali. Even at that age I found it strange that they did not learn Bengali even though they were living in East Pakistan<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> After being promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, Rahman became the principal of Jhenidah Cadet College. In April 1971, a captain of the Pakistan Army shot and killed him outside his office because he insisted that the army not harass the teachers and staff of his college.

<sup>7</sup> One of few exceptions was Zahid Hassan who was one class junior to me. His family left Bangladesh in 1971. Zahid married a Bengali woman and now lives in the US. He continues to be a very dear friend.



Except for social studies (history, geography and civics) and Bengali, we used Indian textbooks as was the practice in other English medium schools; a legacy of the pre-partition days I suppose. We read juvenile versions of the classics in every class; and in class eight we read Dickens' 'Great Expectations' in its original. In class nine and ten, we read intermediate level texts for chemistry, physics and biology. The school library had a good collection of American textbooks for all levels, courtesy of the Asia Foundation. Like many of my peers, I loved the American textbooks because of their simple and lucid language and beautiful illustrations.

We studied Islamic history in class eight and used a college level textbook. Lessons in government and democracy were taught in civics classes using Pakistani textbooks written by West Pakistani authors. The propaganda in these books was so heavy that even our teachers smirked when these topics were taught. We read the official Pakistani version of the creation of Pakistan where the contribution of the people and the leaders of East Bengal were largely ignored. The textbooks postulated that Jinnah was the father of the nation and Liaquat Ali Khan his able lieutenant. The only Bengali leader who appeared positively in these books was A. K. Fazlul Haq because he moved the Lahore Resolution for the creation of Pakistan. Nawab Sir Salimullah was mentioned as the person who hosted the event that created the Muslim League. These texts emphasized Pakistan as the dream of the Urdu poet Allama Iqbal although Iqbal's vision of a separate homeland for the Muslims of India did not envisage the Muslims of eastern India to be a part of that homeland. There was no mention of the fact that in the plebiscite for the creation of Pakistan it was the people of East Bengal who voted for Pakistan. Had they not voted overwhelmingly there would be no Pakistan. The official version emphasized that the Aligarh movement was the precursor to the creation of Pakistan. We learnt nothing about the language movement of 1952 or the formation and the subsequent dismissal of the United Front Government in East Bengal in 1954. Instead, the texts emphasized that politicians misruled Pakistan after the assassination of Liaquat Ali Khan<sup>8</sup>. Politics had to be cleansed and

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<sup>8</sup> Liaquat Ali Khan's assassination was never properly investigated and the police officer who shot the assassin in cold blood was rewarded with high office in the Ayub era.

General Ayub Khan and the Pakistan military had 'saved the country' by promulgating martial law and eventually introducing a new type of democracy called basic democracy<sup>9</sup>. Under basic democracy, the people elected an electoral college of eighty thousand basic democrats, forty thousand from each wing thus negating any numerical political advantage that East Pakistan had over West Pakistan under universal adult franchise. The Electoral College elected the president and members of the national and provincial assemblies. The official line was that Ayub Khan's basic democracy was the best form of democracy for a developing country and the people of Pakistan were blessed to have a visionary leader like him who had also promoted himself to the rank of Field Marshal after usurping state power.

Our teachers, the majority of whom were Bengalis, taught the official text in the classroom but they did not seem to believe what they were teaching. In private conversations, especially when we were in class nine/ten, they would tell us that martial law was imposed in Pakistan to exploit the people of East Pakistan. Also, they did not share the virulence against Hindus or Indians that the textbooks espoused<sup>10</sup>. In our study of the partition of India and the independence struggle against the British, the role of the Indian National Congress and contribution of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru was almost relegated to a footnote.

Our school had wards of several politicians. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's second son, Jamal, studied there as did the sons of Aaur Rahman Khan, the former Chief Minister of East Bengal, Khwaja Khairuddin and Mashiur Rahman (Jadu Mia). The first time I became conscious of politics was during the presidential elections of 1965 fought between the incumbent Ayub Khan and Fatima Jinnah, the sister of Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the founder of

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<sup>9</sup> East Pakistani politicians were described as hooligans and were held responsible for the death of the speaker of the provincial assembly in a pandemonium that broke out in the house.

<sup>10</sup> Many of our teachers were politically active in their student life. They were products of their experience and aspirations. Some of them participated in the Language Movement of 1952 and the Movement for the United Front Government in East Bengal in 1954. Out of fifty or sixty teachers, only two were Hindus and only one or two were Urdu speaking. Official Pakistani history, written after 1971, states that school teachers in East Pakistan were overwhelmingly Hindus who undermined the Pakistan State in their classrooms. This is not true. East Pakistani teachers simply did not buy into Ayub Khan's propaganda.

Pakistan. All throughout, we were taught that Jinnah was the greatest, and Ayub Khan was his true successor who would take Pakistan to mercurial heights. Yet, it was Jinnah's sister who opposed Ayub's rule and openly stated that it was destroying Pakistan. That struck me as being very odd. Why was the sister of the founder of Pakistan opposing Ayub Khan if he was truly doing good things for Pakistan and realizing Jinnah's dream? Also, none of the East Pakistani politicians who had sons in our school were supporting Ayub. These boys were saying the same things their fathers were saying. It made more sense than what we read in our books and heard in our classrooms. Everybody was supporting Fatima Jinnah. However, Ayub's basic democracy and his system of indirect elections ensured that Fatima Jinnah lost<sup>11</sup>.

The school emphasized the development of esprit-de-corps. We had a school song and every house had a house song. We sang them before and after the many competitions we would have. The Punjabi education corps lieutenant colonel principal who introduced the system of school and house songs wanted these songs to be martial and Islamic in nature. Our school song was Kazi Nazrul Islam's *Chol, chol, chol*<sup>12</sup>. Rabindra-sangeet (Rabindranath Tagore's song) was discouraged because it was written by a Hindu. The government controlled Radio Pakistan and Pakistan Television did not even air Rabindra-sangeet. Each house had a house elder, a sort of super prefect who was in charge of all the prefects of that house. Our house elder was Ehsanul Kabir, a student of class ten, four classes my senior, and he selected *Khorobaiyu boye bege chari dik chai meghe...* as our House song. Our House Master, a Punjabi from Multan, had no idea what this song was all about. They were telling us not to sing Tagore songs and Fazlul Haque House chose a Rabindra-sangeet! All the Bengali teachers knew what was going on but there was a conspiracy of silence and the Urdu-speaking teachers including the principal never wised up. Ehsanul Kabir had outwitted them all and we merrily sang *khoro baiyu* till I left the school in 1968.

<sup>11</sup> Ayub gave considerable perks and privilege to the basic democrats which were effectively a bribe. Ayub won 64% of the Electoral College votes in the presidential election of 1965.

<sup>12</sup> '*Moha-shoshan*', a word in the original Nazrul work meaning 'great cremation ground' (of the Hindus) was officially replaced with '*gorosthan*' meaning Muslim cemetery. The fact that the words rhymed helped.

In September 1965, war broke out between Pakistan and India when the Pakistan army infiltrated large numbers of military personnel in civilian clothes into Kashmir<sup>13</sup>. The objective was to start an uprising to eventually take hold of Kashmir from Indian control. India responded by opening up a wide front by attacking all along the West Pakistan border and the city of Lahore, the capital of West Pakistan, came under intense threat. The Bengali soldiers of the 1 East Bengal fought valiantly in the Khem Karan sector to defend Lahore. Such was the valor of this battalion that it received the highest number of gallantry awards in the entire Pakistan army. The achievements of the Pakistan Air Force got special mention every day. Newspapers, television and radio news reports were replete with stories about the courage and gallantry of the Muslim Pakistani soldier who was characterized as being far superior to his Hindu enemy. This was propaganda. The reality was that the Pakistani adventure had failed to achieve its objective and after about two weeks of fighting, the Ayub Government was trying its best to end the war through a United Nations mediated cease fire which eventually materialized. Although there were no hostilities along the borders of East Pakistan, the '65 war opened the eyes of people and leaders here about our vulnerability to external aggression. Except for one poorly equipped division and a squadron of fighter jets, all of Pakistan's military resources were in West Pakistan. The defence of East Pakistan was pretty much left to Providence<sup>14</sup>. The 1965 war was used as an excuse to sever all economic transactions with India. The economies of East Bengal and West Bengal were intertwined in many ways for centuries and its importance increased during the British Rule. The abrupt break in economic relations with India brought tremendous hardships to the eastern province especially for private manufacturers who used Indian inputs. Air and rail communication with India that

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<sup>13</sup> The operation was code named 'Operation Gibraltar'. The Pakistan army crossed the line of control in the second week of August 1965. Open hostilities began on September 6, 1965 and continued till September 23 when both countries agreed to a UN mandated cease fire.

<sup>14</sup> The Pakistani military establishment articulated a strategy that 'the defense of East Pakistan lies in the west' meaning that East Pakistan need not be defended. A vigorous defense in West Pakistan would ensure that India would not have the resources to attack East Pakistan, a strategy that did not work even in 1965. In 1971, the Pakistani military establishment officially embraced the same doctrine with disastrous consequences.

had existed until then ended and was not to resume again as long as East Bengal remained a part of Pakistan.

During the 1965 war, our principal, Lieutenant Colonel Mohammad Shafi, spared no opportunity to extol the virtues of the Muslim Pakistan armed forces. In one occasion, he even had Squadron Leader M. M. Alam, supposedly a Bengali and a decorated fighter pilot visit our school and give us a talk on patriotism. The final settlement of the war took place the following year in Tashkent through a tripartite agreement between Pakistan, India and the Soviet Union<sup>15</sup>. Scrutiny of the Tashkent agreement showed that every claim and demand made by India was acceded to by Pakistan. For instance, in Kashmir, Pakistan agreed to pull back to positions as of August 5, 1965. Ayub Khan even wrote by hand that Pakistan would not resort to arms in order to settle the Kashmir issue. Although the Pakistani media put a positive spin on the Tashkent settlement, the foreign press saw it on its terms. The house common rooms received international news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Economist* and the reports appearing in these magazines did not match the reports of the Pakistani press<sup>16</sup>. Many students were confused by the apparent discrepancy between the Pakistani press and the international press. Some even sought the principal's opinion since he was a military man, but he could not provide any satisfactory reconciliation.

In 1966, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced the Six Points agenda in Lahore for full provincial autonomy for the provinces of Pakistan. The Six Points sought a federal form of parliamentary democracy in Pakistan where elections would be held on the basis of universal adult franchise. Except for defence and foreign affairs all other affairs of the government would be handled by the federating provinces. The Six Points were consistent with the Pakistan Resolution (Lahore Declaration of 1940) which formed the basis of the Pakistan movement<sup>17</sup>. The Six Points were condemned as a seditious agenda by most West Pakistani politicians and even Maulana Bhashani of the National Awami Party (NAP) termed it a

<sup>15</sup> The Tashkent Agreement was signed on January 10, 1966.

<sup>16</sup> Very few students actually read these magazines; most only flipped through the pages to view the pictures.

<sup>17</sup> The Pakistan Declaration envisaged 'a confederation of sovereign states' for the Muslims of India which Jinnah arbitrarily changed to a singular state from the plural states after the resolution was adopted.

CIA plot. Bhashani's stance eventually split the NAP with Professor Muzaffar Ahmed leading a second faction in East Pakistan and Wali Khan a third in West Pakistan. Even within the Awami League, support for Six Points was not unanimous. Abdur Rashid Tarkabagish, the president of Awami League was upset at Mujib's announcement of the Six Points without proper party authorization and he walked out of the party meeting when Six Points was being discussed. He ultimately gave up the presidency of the Awami League and Mujib was elected President and Tajuddin Ahmed General Secretary.

We were supposed to speak in English in school; the Bengali teachers spoke to us in Bengali only when the Principal or other Urdu speaking teachers were not around. Six Points changed all that. Bengali teachers now spoke in Bengali with each other and with us without a care who overheard. The same happened with students; we spoke in Bengali in front of the Urdu speaking teachers and students. We just did not care. It was open defiance.

In 1968, the Government of Pakistan started the Agartala Conspiracy Case against some junior to mid level Bengali military officers and personnel<sup>18</sup>. The case was described as a plot by certain Bengalis to take over military installations in East Pakistan and declare the province an independent country. The same year, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested as the principal accused in the case. Among the arrested was my cousin, Captain Shamsul Alam, a physician in the Army Medical Corps who was posted in Comilla at that time. This created considerable anxiety among our elders. My father got busy with the lawyers who were going to defend Alam in the forthcoming trial. It was a difficult time for the family.

In the beginning of 1968, Ayub Khan, who had taken over state power through a military coup in 1958, decided to celebrate his decade in power. He termed the period as the 'Decade of Development'. The state controlled radio and television went on an overdrive to highlight the development of the country under the rule of the dictator. These celebrations had exactly the opposite effect in East Pakistan because the images and reports that were being presented by the state controlled media were all in West Pakistan. All the big dams, gas fields, roads, bridges, and expansion

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<sup>18</sup> Officially, the case was known as State versus Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and others.

of power network that took place in Ayub era were there and not here. On the other hand, East Pakistani products such as jute, tea and leather were the principal foreign exchange earners for Pakistan<sup>19</sup>. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's message of discrimination and deprivation of Bengalis in the state of Pakistan struck a chord with the people of East Pakistan. The Six Points seemed legitimate and a true reflection of Bengali aspirations. The fact that the people of East Pakistan were the majority in the state of Pakistan who overwhelmingly voted for the creation of Pakistan only added insult to injury. Ayub Khan and Iskander Mirza dismissed the Suhrawardy Government by imposing martial law in 1958 only to prevent the holding of national elections under universal adult franchise. Such an election would have given the majority of seats in the national assembly to the eastern province<sup>20</sup>. The civil service-military-feudal rulers of Pakistan either failed to gauge the aspirations of the people of East Pakistan or they were simply going to impose their will on the Bengalis. The aspirations of the people of East Pakistan did not enter into any consideration. The perception in East Pakistan was that 'the decade of development' in effect was 'the decade of deprivation' for the Bengalis of East Pakistan<sup>21</sup>.

In 1968, I finished Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination and was not willing to return to the boarding school for two more years. So, I joined Notre Dame College, a catholic college run by the fathers of the Holy Cross. Shakawat Mobin Chowdhury (Shahan) was the only other student from my school to join Notre Dame with me. Notre Dame was refreshing, not so

<sup>19</sup> In the 1960s, the remittance from expatriate workers was rather small and was not a significant source of foreign exchange earnings.

<sup>20</sup> Suhrawardy, was the prime minister of Pakistan. He was the chief of Awami League and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's political mentor. He formed a minority government with less than 10 members of his party in the National Assembly. Suhrawardy's only aim was to hold elections and get a people's mandate. Iskandar Mirza, a former military officer as well as an officer of the Indian Political Service was Ayub's principal collaborator in the coup that overthrew the Suhrawardy Government. Ayub sent Mirza on exile a couple of weeks after taking over power.

<sup>21</sup> East Pakistan's economy grew at 2.2% during Ayub's rule and the growth rate of West Pakistan was 4.4%. The principal reason for this disparity was the amount of central government expenditures in each wing. For instance, Ayub built a new city, Islamabad, which was going to be the capital of Pakistan. East Pakistan got the "Second Capital" (Sher-e-Bangla Nagar) as a consolation prize. The difference in the investment outlays of the two cities highlight why Bengalis felt left out. This coupled with a disproportionate investment in infrastructure in West Pakistan from the foreign exchange earnings of East Pakistani exports only added salt to the wound.



restricted like RMS. I was staying at home; I could grow my hair and also enjoy other liberties denied at the boarding school.

The trial of the Agartala Conspiracy Case made the students of East Pakistan very agitated. Demonstrations, meetings and processions became the order of the day. Dacca University led the way. Cultural organisations such as *Chhayanat*, *Bulbul Academy*, *Udichi Shilpo Goshti* and other small neighbourhood cultural groups started holding events on Bengali culture and history. These were really shoestring organizations; performing at street corners or under a tree somewhere. It was not uncommon to see a truck with performers making the rounds of neighbourhoods. They'd stop at a place and a crowd would gather to listen to patriotic songs, poetry or nationalistic speeches. The artistes and the organisers not only performed free they also paid out of their pockets for their food and drinks. A low budget cultural movement was taking on the Pakistani propaganda machine. These events had more impact on the people of Dacca than the Pakistan Radio or Television. They not only emphasized the cultural heritage of the people of East Bengal by energizing our nationalistic sentiments, they also highlighted the cultural differences between us and the people of West Pakistan. Many who took part in these events had personally suffered at the hands of the Pakistani authorities. By 1969, people of my age in East Pakistan felt that we were different from West Pakistanis (or non-Bengalis) and did not like their patronizing mindset. It was clear that they were ruling us with the power of the gun and were our oppressors. In spite of going to a school that was supposed to have produced good Pakistanis, the propaganda had no effect on me or most of my fellow students. The movement picked up momentum in the later part of 1969 when Dacca University Central Students Union or DUCSU as it is commonly known started the 11 point movement that sort of turned into the demand to free Sheikh Mujib and withdraw Agartala Conspiracy Case<sup>22</sup>. I took part in many

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<sup>22</sup> The anti-government movement had in fact started in West Pakistan when some students of Punjab University were beaten up by the police in Landi Kotal in the Khyber Pass. Students all over West Pakistan came out in protests. Initially, East Pakistani students showed solidarity with the students of West Pakistan by bringing out processions and organizing other forms of protests. Within a short time, the East Pakistan student movement turned into a mass movement to free the people of East Pakistan from West Pakistani domination. Nevertheless, Ayub Khan's downfall began in the Khyber Pass.

such demonstrations although I did not know much about politics and was not too conversant with the details of East Pakistan's deprivation. Nevertheless, it felt good to be protesting, seeking justice for the oppressed and doing the right thing.

A typical day would be a meeting around noon at *Battala* in the Arts Faculty compound of Dacca University followed by a procession that would go out in front of New Market, Lalbagh, Chowk Bazar, all the way through Babubazar, Islampur, Nawabpur and end at the Paltan Maidan<sup>23</sup>. The authorities didn't interfere; the processions were not baton charged. Of course, we didn't throw stones at the police or set fire to anything. We just protested with slogans, placards and so forth. There was no threat to life or property. This movement gained momentum very rapidly and within a month the students had brought life in Dacca to a standstill.

Ayub Khan was now in a corner and was willing to negotiate with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The President's proposal was to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman on parole so that he could attend a Round Table Conference in Islamabad with the Government of Pakistan. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman agreed to go to the Round Table Conference only if he could go as a free man. After all, a prisoner on parole cannot negotiate with the President of Pakistan on the future of the country<sup>24</sup>. Eventually, Agartala Conspiracy Case was withdrawn and all those who were accused were released. However, the Pakistani military would not let go of the matter without inflicting some pain. A few days before the release of prisoners, they murdered Sergeant Zahurul Haque of the air force on the pretext that he was trying to escape<sup>25</sup>.

The day the Agartala Conspiracy Case was withdrawn, everyone rushed towards the cantonment to receive the great

<sup>23</sup> Tofayel Ahmed was then the vice president of DUCSU. He had acquired a reputation as an orator for making fiery speeches to rouse up the students. In hindsight, it is obvious that the Pakistani authorities misjudged the situation terribly.

<sup>24</sup> During a family visit, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was informed by his wife of the situation outside and she advised him not to accept any release under parole.

<sup>25</sup> Zahurul Haque was meeting his lawyers as well as reading newspapers in prison and was aware of the developments outside the military prison. He must have known that the Agartala Conspiracy Case would be withdrawn and all the prisoners released. So why would he risk his life trying to escape? Zahurul Haque was killed on February 15, 1969 and all prisoners were released on February 22, 1969 after the withdrawal of the case.

Bengali leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. I did the same. By the time I reached the airport at Tejgaon, I heard that he had already gone to his house at Road 32 in Dhanmondi. I went there with my companions and saw him for the first time. Sheikh Mujib was a tall handsome man with a deep voice. He met people freely and embraced them generously; he spoke without pretensions. I was seventeen and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman made a huge impression on me. He was our leader whom the people of East Pakistan loved. A citizen's rally and public meeting was announced for the following day at the racecourse. *Paltan Maidan* was the usual venue for such meetings and this was the first time a meeting was being held at the racecourse because the size of the crowd was expected to be too large to be accommodated at Paltan.

I attended with my friends. It was a mammoth gathering. The racecourse looked like a sea of humanity. Several hundred thousand people from all walks of life and from all age groups were there in a festive mood. Unlike state sponsored events, the arrangements were rather Spartan. An elevated stage made of bamboo and wooden planks was put up for the speakers. A white cloth was wrapped around the podium. In his speech, Tofayel Ahmed, President of Chhatra League, bestowed the title of *Bangabandhu* (Friend of Bengal) on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman amidst thunderous cheers from the crowd. Mujib's was the last speech. I had never heard him speak before. As he stood up, the cheers reached a crescendo. When it died out, Mujib started to speak. He spoke with poise, slowly and deliberately recollecting the plight of the people of East Pakistan in the Pakistani state. He wasn't bitter about the personal trials and tribulations he had suffered at the hands of Pakistani rulers. The speech was brilliant and statesmanlike. His resolve and determination was visible and the crowd cheered him as their true leader.

The withdrawal of the Agartala Conspiracy Case was the last nail in the coffin of the Ayub regime. Ayub Khan stepped down and handed over power to the Commander-in-Chief of Pakistan Army, General Yahya Khan and the country was again under a martial law. Initially, Yahya Khan's martial law was mild and there was at least a token recognition of Bengali grievances. He promised to hold elections under universal adult franchise at the

earliest possible time and hand over state power to the elected representatives of the people. This was something that had never happened in Pakistan. Ayub's martial law was to prevent an election under universal adult franchise. Yahya also promoted certain Bengali civil servants and military officers to pacify Bengalis who felt that their voices were not reflected in state matters. After the fall of the Ayub regime, it was clear that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was the undisputed leader of East Pakistan and only an election could determine the extent of his popularity.

The next significant event was in mid 1970, when I entered Dacca University. On November 12 that year, the coast of East Pakistan was struck by a devastating tropical cyclone. About half a million people were killed, mostly by the tidal wave. The wind velocity recorded was a staggering 185 km/h (115 mph). The offshore islands like Bhola, Hatiya, Sandwip, Char Manpura, Char Fashon, Char Alexander, and many others looked like as if they were subject to a nuclear attack; everything was razed to the ground. I went to the devastated areas to distribute relief for a week. The destruction was unbelievable. Trees and structures of all kinds were twisted and uprooted. Bloated corpses of man and animal floated in the numerous rivers and canals. Every water body was contaminated with dead bodies and there was a severe shortage of drinking water and emergency food supplies. The Pakistan Army, Navy and Air Force were missing from action. Had it not been for the timely response of American and British forces in bringing relief to the distressed, an equal number of people could have died in the aftermath.

The central government's apathy towards the cyclone victims was unexpected. People here simply could not comprehend why their government did not come to their assistance in such trying times when many foreign governments were sending their military assets for relief and rescue operations. The international media arrived en masse to cover the devastation and they too saw first-hand the niggardly and insensitive attitude of the Pakistani authorities towards the cyclone victims. Sheikh Mujib and other leaders of the Awami League toured the affected areas; and undertook a massive relief program. Before the international

media, Mujib accused the Yahya Government of criminal negligence<sup>26</sup>. Mujib's accusations struck a chord with the people of East Pakistan who felt that their government not only failed them at a time of great natural calamity but that the West Pakistani ruling elite was only interested in exploiting the wealth and resources of the eastern province and cared nothing about its people.

The first elections in Pakistan under universal adult franchise took place in December the same year. I was officially 19 and became a voter. I was still a young student just watching everything with curiosity and wonder; going along with what the other students were doing. The mood all over East Pakistan was upbeat. East Pakistan had 169 seats in the 300-seat Pakistan National Assembly; and the expectation was that the results of this election would put Bengalis in government that would eventually ensure that East Pakistanis got their due share in national development. On Election Day, I voted for *Nouka* (boat), the election symbol of the Awami League. After casting my vote in Testuri Bazar, I had the indelible ink removed from my finger from one of the many 'indelible ink removal centres' that had sprung up in most neighbourhoods<sup>27</sup>. I then rushed to Khwaje Dewan, our ancestral neighbourhood in Lalbagh, where I was also a voter and cast my vote again. This was a vote against Khwaja Khairuddin who was competing against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, although with hindsight it would seem that this was not necessary given the margin of Mujib's victory there.

The election results were better than what we had expected; Awami League won an overwhelming majority winning 161 out of the 163 seats contested in East Pakistan<sup>28</sup>. However, Awami League did not win any seats in West Pakistan and none of the West Pakistani parties won anything in East Pakistan. Bengalis were dissatisfied with their deprivation in the Pakistani state and for the first time in their lives they were able to express their feelings through the ballot box. The prospect of having a Bengali government in Pakistan for the first time in its history pleased every Bengali. On the other hand, the Pakistan military and West

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<sup>26</sup> Archer Blood, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2002.

<sup>27</sup> It must not have been that indelible after all.

<sup>28</sup> Election in the cyclone devastated areas for the six remaining seats was held at a later date and Mujib's party won all the seats.

Pakistani politicians were totally astonished at the outcome of the elections in East Pakistan. They expected the Awami League to win but had no idea that the Awami League and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were going to sweep the elections in East Pakistan<sup>29</sup>. If the Pakistani Authorities had any inkling about what the election results might be, then, in all likelihood the elections would probably not have been held or if it were held at all, it would have been massively rigged.

Pakistan was entering a period of uncharted waters in its 24-year history and the nervousness of the Pakistani ruling class was apparent. The Bengalis were ecstatic. People were talking about the election results in homes, offices, marketplaces, educational institutions, rail stations, ferry crossings airports, hospitals, even in places of worship – everywhere. But there were apprehensions too. What if the Pakistani military does not hand over power? It was however clear that people in East Pakistan would resist any effort by the regime to thrust military rule on the province. A popular joke among students of colleges and universities in Dacca at that time was: “We are not going to remain second class citizens in a third class country; if need be, we shall create our own third class country and be first class citizens there”.

After the election, Yahya Khan invited Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to Islamabad for talks so that the arrangements of handing over power could be thrashed out. Mujib, however, saw something sinister in this invitation and declined to go for one reason or the other. Yahya Khan, who had not visited the cyclone devastated areas at all, saw this as an opportunity to visit these places and meet Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Dacca. After the visit, before leaving Dacca, Yahya referred to Mujib as the future prime minister of Pakistan and Mujib pledged to retain Yahya as President.

<sup>29</sup> The predictions of Pakistani intelligence services for West Pakistani provinces of Punjab, Sind, Baluchistan and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) were within the margin of error. They estimated the PPP would win about 50-60 seats. However, their prediction for East Pakistan was furthest from what actually happened. The election results had put a spanner in the wheels of power in Pakistan. Their prediction had said the Awami League would win 70-80 seats in East Pakistan and would have to form a coalition with the smaller political parties to form a government. Yahya, Bhutto & Co. woke up to their worst nightmare.

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## Impending Storm

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Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) watched the events in Dacca with great concern and interest. Given the election results, the best that he could expect for himself was to be leader of the opposition in the parliament where Bengalis would be in the treasury bench and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman the prime minister. Yahya Khan's statement before his departure from Dacca only confirmed his worst fears. Bhutto could not bring himself to accept a Pakistan where 'East Pakistani peasants' would be at the helm of affairs<sup>1</sup>. Bhutto understood the Pakistan power equation well. He became the commerce minister and later foreign minister in Ayub Khan's cabinet before his fortieth birthday. As foreign minister during and after the 1965 war, he led the Pakistani side in the negotiations in Tashkent and was familiar with the thinking of the military brass. He cultivated personal relationships with many generals of the army, especially Lieutenant General Pirzada who was Yahya Khan's principal staff officer for martial law affairs. Bhutto had even befriended the so called 'General Rani'; an ex-wife of a former police officer who was a procurer of women for Yahya. He was going to use everything at his disposal to persuade Yahya Khan to backtrack from his Dacca statement.

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<sup>1</sup> The United Front Government of East Bengal abolished the *Zamindari* system in 1954 which effectively reduced the economic and political muscle of the landed gentry. Since its inception, power in Pakistan was with the landed gentry. They were the leaders of the principal political parties and their wards were the most influential officers in the civil service and defence services. Bhutto himself was a *Zamindar* in Sind and he saw Awami League's massive victory in the elections as a fundamental shift in the power structure in Pakistan. He would do everything in his power to stop Mujib from forming a government.

On his arrival at Karachi, Yahya was received at the airport by Bhutto and senior members of his military cabinet. From Karachi airport they went straight to Bhutto's ancestral home in Larkana in Sind supposedly for a bird shoot. In reality, Yahya and his entourage never even stepped outside in the open in Larkana. The purpose of the meeting was to hatch a conspiracy to deny Bengalis and the Awami League of their constitutional and democratic rights. The get together had several top brass of the Pakistan army including General Abdul Hamid, Lieutenant General Gul Hasan, Lieutenant General Pirzada, Major General Mittha and Lieutenant General Akbar. These men were going to decide on the political future of Pakistan. Everything that Yahya had said and did in Dacca was a sham. It was merely a public relations ploy; and this was the real deal. Yahya, Bhutto and the generals after several days of discussion decided that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would not be allowed to form a government. The response of the Pakistan military and Pakistan People's Party to Awami League's demand for provincial autonomy was genocide. The collective wisdom of the top brass of the Pakistan army and Bhutto was: "If you kill three million Bengalis the rest shall eat out of our hands"<sup>2</sup>. The Pakistani regime's relationship with the Nixon Administration was an important factor behind this decision. The Yahya Government was helping the United States to open up a line of communication with the People's Republic of China and the Pakistani brass felt that the US Government would view the planned genocide as Pakistan's internal affair and would not interfere. Bengalis would be bludgeoned into submission. There was not any thought of what would happen if this strategy did not work. There was no 'Plan B'. This colossal decision was made in cold blood. The human tragedy and moral compunctions did not enter into any consideration. Accordingly, the military machine was ordered to come up with the necessary operational plan<sup>3</sup>. The die was cast. Major General Mittha was dispatched to Dacca to personally supervise the preparations especially the 'neutralization' of high priority targets.

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<sup>2</sup> Yahya had actually said this to Robert Payne of the *New York Times* on February 22, 1971. See Pierre Stephen Robert Payne, *Massacre*, New York: Macmillan, 1973.

<sup>3</sup> The original plan was drawn up by Lieutenant General Shahabzada Yakub Khan when he was the GOC-in-C Eastern Command. Khan's plan was drawn up to deal with a complete breakdown of law and order situation in East Pakistan. Although Khan drew up the plan, he had recommended to the General Headquarters that this plan never be implemented. He was removed from command in early March 1971.



The details of the Larkana meeting reached Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Dacca but what could he do? He neither had an army nor the resources to take on the Pakistan Army. Moreover, nothing had happened on the ground as yet to justify any unilateral action to deal with the conspiracy. In mid-February, Bhutto declared that he and members of his party would not attend the National Assembly session in Dacca scheduled to start on March 3. He also instructed the PPP activists to break the legs of any West Pakistani member of the National Assembly who joined its opening session. However, Air Marshal Asghar Khan and some other members from his party had started to trickle into Dacca.

People of East Pakistan sensed that something sinister was afoot but they could not in their wildest thoughts imagine what was coming. Dacca airport was the only place where one could sense something unusual was underway. In every flight from West Pakistan, there were practically no civilian passengers. All arriving flights brought in soldiers in civilian clothes. These soldiers would not even enter Dacca through the airport terminal. After deplaning, they would assemble in one of the hangers and would be marched off to the cantonment through the air force base.

East Pakistan was rife with speculations and conjectures. In Dacca there was only one topic of discussion: what would happen if Bhutto does not join the National Assembly? Some people felt Bhutto was posturing and would eventually join the National Assembly on the appointed day after his usual theatrics that was characteristic of him. The more important question was what will the army do? And why are they bringing in so many soldiers from West Pakistan?

Around this time, an Indian Airlines airplane was hijacked by so called Kashmiri militants who brought the plane to Lahore<sup>4</sup>. Bhutto enthusiastically met the hijackers at Lahore Airport and described them as 'true soldiers of Islam'. The hijackers eventually blew up the aircraft in the tarmac with assistance from Pakistani security personnel. India responded by banning over-flights over their territory by all Pakistani aircrafts. This meant that Pakistani

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<sup>4</sup> Subsequent disclosures, many years after the event revealed that the hijacking was the work of Indian government agencies. One of the hijackers, a Kashmiri Muslim was a member of India's Border Security Force. See Colonel (Dr.) Anil Athale (2005), "Did India Plant 1965 War Plans," *The Rediff Special*, June 2, 2005.

aircrafts traveling between East and West Pakistan would now have to fly around the Indian peninsula. This obviously made the airlift of soldiers from West to East Pakistan difficult, but the airlift continued.

On March 1, 1971, I was watching an unofficial cricket test match between Pakistan and the touring MCC at Dacca Stadium. Cricket matches were a lot of fun and I did not miss the opportunity to witness one if the game was played in Dacca. Such matches were also an occasion to rail against Pakistani discrimination since no Bengali had ever made it to the first eleven in the Pakistan team. The one or two East Pakistanis that made it to the first eleven were not ethnic Bengalis; they were Urdu speaking East Pakistanis. This time around, my friend Roquibul Hasan, a fellow Bengali and a contemporary in Dacca University was playing for Pakistan. He was only 19 and opened the batting. His bat had a triangular sticker with the words *Joy Bangla* and a *Nouka*, the election symbol of the Awami League. Roquibul later told us that there was quite a bit of commotion in the Pakistani dressing room as to why he had put a political sticker on his bat. The downside was that Roquibul did not bat well and scored only 1 in each innings.

On the last day of the match, the government announced that the national assembly session scheduled for March 3 was postponed till March 25. The stadium was full, everyone was supporting the home team, Pakistan, but in a moment the place exploded. People rushed into the ground and all the players except Roquibul were chased out. Bonfires were lit with chairs and the overhead canopies set alight. I trooped out with my companions and walked to Hotel Purbani, practically next door. Sheikh Mujib was holding a meeting inside. The crowd was growing bigger by the minute and nobody knew what was going on. Everyone expected Sheikh Mujibur Rahman to come out and speak but he never did. Some student leaders were speaking to the crowd over loudspeakers from the roof of the car porch when someone brought a Pakistani flag and set it on fire! The crowd cheered loudly<sup>5</sup>. Then, for the first time I saw the red, green and yellow flag

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<sup>5</sup> We had gotten used to watching American students burn the American flag in protest of the Vietnam War.

of 'Bangladesh' being waved from the car porch roof<sup>6</sup>. It felt strange. I felt pride but also fear.

Around dusk, an announcement came that Mujib had called a general strike on March 3. Government offices in the eastern province were instructed not to take orders from Islamabad. Military food suppliers were told not to supply anything to the cantonments and by and large most of them complied. The general strike was a complete success. Vehicles stayed off roads, shops and markets were closed, and educational institutions did not hold classes. Normal civic and economic activities came to a standstill. Subsequently, the strike was extended indefinitely and the word was that unless a definite date for the first session of the National Assembly was announced the strike would continue. It seemed as though the writ of the Pakistan Government had ended in East Pakistan. Everything including the functioning of government offices was being done on the instructions of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

From March 1 onwards, thousands would gather outside Mujib's house from the crack of dawn to late night to hear their leader but Sheikh did not make any statement. Instead, a public meeting was announced for March 7 in the racecourse *maidan* where he would speak. Everyone waited for the big event. On March 7, people started converging on the racecourse from early morning. I reached there around midday. The place was packed as far as the eye could see. The crowd would eventually spill over to the adjoining roads and the adjacent Ramna Park. I had never seen such a mammoth crowd. We waited in the sun as military helicopters and light aircrafts flew overhead. Eventually, more than a million people would assemble there. People were speculating what Mujib would say. Would he live up to expectations? Would he declare independence and if he did so, what would the army do? Would they attack us from the air? Anything could happen. There was considerable nervousness but no one left the venue; such was the resolve and the nature of the defiance.

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<sup>6</sup> The yellow or golden map of Bangladesh at the center of the red disc was discontinued after 1971 because people couldn't draw the correct map of Bangladesh and there were too many distortions.

Sheikh Mujibur Rahman arrived around three in the afternoon and the meeting got underway. Mujib did not make a prepared speech and was not looking at any papers; he spoke from his heart. It was an epoch making speech, it was fiery, defiant and yet he did not close the door for negotiations if that was still possible<sup>7</sup>. He summed up the situation in the country and the feelings of the people of East Pakistan with a clear message to the Yahya government to follow democratic norms or the people of East Pakistan would do what they needed to do to establish their rights. He warned them not to use the military against the people and if any such attempt was made it would be resisted by the people by denying the army the food and water of Bengal. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's speech sounded like symphony to his audience. Although there was no outright declaration of independence, he did say "The struggle this time is the struggle for our freedom! The struggle this time is the struggle for independence!" The speech was punctuated by thunderous cheers of *Joy Bangla*. It was his finest hour.

In the meeting, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced a complete non-cooperation movement against the Islamabad government. People were instructed not to pay taxes and he gave instructions for the essential services, banks, courts and government offices to function but only according to his instructions. From the following day, people of East Pakistan, irrespective of status, started following Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's directives. Newspapers carried reports and images of various preparations that were underway although most of it was only symbolic. For instance, university students started doing military style drills with dummy rifles although we all knew that none of that would come to any use if the Pakistan army actually attacked. After all, you cannot take on a professional army with dummy rifles.

With university classes suspended, there was very little for me to do. Every morning, I would take our guard's bicycle and roam the streets of Dacca. I would go to Road 32 in Dhanmondi to see

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<sup>7</sup>Yahya was coming to East Pakistan for discussions with Mujib and an outright declaration of independence would nullify any prospect of the meeting with Yahya. Besides, Mujib really did not have any hidden card which he could potentially use against the Pakistan army.

Sheikh Kamal, Mujib's eldest son. Kamal was a friend. We played cricket for the same club, Uday of Hartirpool that somehow got catapulted to the first division after becoming the second division champions<sup>8</sup>. One day, Kamal took me to a secret 'training camp' located in a house near the Physical Training Institute in the Mohammadpur area. About twenty to thirty people had gathered there and I knew most of the young men present. The training weapon was a .22 bolt action rifle and the trainer was one of the defendants of the Agartala Conspiracy Case. It was more like a pep rally than a proper weapons training session. I doubted if such training would be of any use against the Pakistan army. It could only boost morale, and nothing else. One could not escape the feeling that we did not have what we needed to fight against the Pakistan Army. The only hope was the Bengali soldiers in the Pakistan Army and the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR). Were the Bengali soldiers going to be with us if the situation came to a showdown? There was no way of knowing<sup>9</sup>. At my friend Bashir's house in Eskaton, I often ran into Captain Salek Chowdhury, a Bengali staff officer in Eastern Command. He was Matin Chowdhury's older brother. Matin was a friend from Notre Dame who later became my course mate in Murtee. I would ask Salek what the Bengali soldiers would do if the Pakistan Army attacked Bengalis. Of course, he did not give any direct answers but it seemed that many would revolt if the situation came to that<sup>10</sup>.

In spite of the underlying fear and the stress that it created, a festive atmosphere prevailed in Dacca. I was visiting friends and gathering information although the veracity of all the tit bits I collected was questionable. One Friday morning, four of us were chatting in Eskaton when we had this urge to be useful to the movement by doing something, anything. People in the streets

<sup>8</sup> There was no premier division in those days.

<sup>9</sup> Several military personnel had tried to contact Sheikh Mujibur Rahman those days. Invariably such contacts were handled by Colonel Osmany who had earlier retired from the Pakistan Army and joined the Awami League. He was an elected member of the Pakistan National Assembly from Sylhet. Colonel Osmany's response to all these contacts was "go back to your units and follow the chain of command. Necessary instructions will be issued at the appropriate time."

<sup>10</sup> Captain Abdus Salek Chowdhury was promoted and appointed as Commanding Officer of 10 East Bengal after he joined the *Mukti Bahini*. After Khaled Mosharraf's injury, he took command of 'K' Force, a *Mukti Bahini* brigade. His youngest brother, Khalek Chowdhury (Sadeq), was picked up by *Al-Badr* from their home in Tikatuly, Dacca in the final days of the war never to be found again.

were enforcing Mujib's orders and we decided to 'enforce' something. "Let's go to the Intercontinental Hotel" someone said. There was no dissent. So we went there and made some noises until the European manager arrived to hear our grievances. We told him Mujib had said no booze on Fridays (Mujib said no such thing) so he should shut down the bar immediately. Deadpan, the manager responded, "Oh, on Fridays we keep it closed". Not knowing what to say, we just managed a stuttered "Okay, good. Good day then", and sheepishly dragged ourselves out of there.

In the second week of March, Yahya Khan arrived in Dacca for discussions with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. A few days later Bhutto joined them but the talks were not making progress. They would not. Yahya, Bhutto and the military top brass had already resolved in Larkana to kill three million of us so that the rest of us would eat out of their hands. The talks were only a ploy to assist the troop build up and the airlift from West Pakistan. Mujib knew that the talks were not sincere and if anything, it was a public relations exercise for the people of West Pakistan so that Yahya and Bhutto could tell them that their best efforts had failed because of Mujib's and Awami League's intransigence. On March 23, Pakistan's Republic Day, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman hoisted the new Bangladesh flag at his residence. Later that day, he went to meet Yahya and Bhutto with the Bangladesh flag and a black flag fluttering in his car.

On March 25, Yahya Khan left Dacca surreptitiously in the afternoon. Within thirty minutes of his departure, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was informed about it by Group Captain Khandakar, who was then working in the air force base in Dacca. Mujib knew what was coming and decided not to run or avoid arrest, but he instructed his colleagues to leave Dacca and organize resistance. Till the last minute, Tajuddin Ahmed, the General Secretary of Awami League, wanted him to sign certain declarations and documents but he declined<sup>11</sup>. He knew that once the Pakistanis arrested him, he would be tried for treason, the penalty for which was death, so he did not want to leave behind any document that could be used against him as evidence.

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<sup>11</sup> A. K. Khandakar, Mueyedul Hasan, and S. R. Mirza, *Muktijudher Purbakar Kothapokothon*, Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashon, 2009.

# 3

## Genocide

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As news of Yahya Khan's departure spread throughout the city, people could somehow intuit that an army crackdown was coming<sup>1</sup>. This immediately triggered a frenzy of activity in every neighborhood of Dacca. People started putting up barricades on all major intersections and crossings with whatever they could lay their hands on. Felled trees, forty gallon oil drums and other debris were piled on the roads. In some places, people brought bricks and other construction materials and stacked them in the middle of the road. Although the effort was valiant, in real terms, a determined army would have no difficulty removing these road blocks. Around 7:30 p.m., I reached Farm Gate and witnessed all that was going on. I was getting a queasy feeling that it may not be safe to hang around in this major intersection for long. Around 8:00 p.m. I decided to go home, a stone's throw from Farm Gate.

The family still hadn't had their dinner and I could see the relief in my parent's faces when they saw me. In the past month, no one knew when I went out or came in. My parents were worried about me and my mother did her best to protect me from my father's tongue lashings. Around 11 o'clock, we heard the first gunshots. What was happening? Obviously, one couldn't go out. We were concerned about my uncle (my father's younger brother) and his family who lived in Road 31, Dhanmondi. His home shared a common boundary wall with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's

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<sup>1</sup> The instructions for the army were to start the crackdown after Yahya Khan's plane landed in Karachi which would be after midnight in East Pakistan. In order to reach their targets the army moved in to the city around 10:30 p.m.

residence. We tried to call him but the phone lines were dead. Within a few minutes, the firing got really intense and now there was a continuous clattering of automatic weapons with periodic booms of large explosions<sup>2</sup>. It sounded like we were in a war zone. I had never heard anything like this before. The family huddled together in the middle of the house away from windows. The fear in everyone's eyes was visible. No one spoke. The only voices were of my mother and sister reciting verses from the Quran. Then, someone remembered we had a Bangladeshi flag on our roof! I had put it up a couple of days ago. Almost every house in Dacca had one or more. Who was going to bring it down? I volunteered and went up to the roof of our one-storied building.

The night sky was lit up by tracers and there was an amber glow all around<sup>3</sup>. The thatched shops of Kawranbazar, the shanties beside the railroad tracks in Tejgaon and Nakhla para had been set ablaze by flamethrowers. When the residents scrambled out to seek safety, they were mowed down by machine guns. I could hear tank tracks from the Farm Gate area and could make out tank silhouettes<sup>4</sup>. With great trepidation, I retrieved the flag. When I came down, my father ordered me to destroy the flag immediately. This was our flag and I couldn't bring myself to desecrate it but this was no time to get into an argument. So, I told him I would do as told. Without anyone's knowledge, I folded the flag neatly, put it inside a plastic bag and hid it in the water tank on the roof. (Many months later, after Bangladesh was liberated and I had returned home, I retrieved my flag).

Nobody slept that night. From time to time we'd peep out the windows. Outside, it was deserted. All doors and windows in every house were tightly shut. The air became acrid with gunpowder odor. There was no respite from the firing and explosions. Sometime in the early hours of the morning, a military jeep entered our lane and pulled up at our gate. We feared the worst but no one got down. It was just prowling and went away

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<sup>2</sup> Also in action were tanks, recoilless rifles and mortars.

<sup>3</sup> In 1971, there weren't any high rise buildings in the neighborhood and one could see the Tejgaon rail station and Farm Gate from our roof.

<sup>4</sup> Bhutto was still in town and witnessed the mayhem from his hotel room while he sipped whisky.



after a while. The firing decreased somewhat by daybreak but intermittent gunfire could still be heard.

Cautiously, I went up to the roof again. There were several plumes of smoke spiraling towards the sky. Dacca looked like a bombed out city. Farm Gate was empty<sup>5</sup>. Occasionally, a military vehicle would speed by. Most military vehicles had machine guns mounted on them and the soldiers were in full battle gear. I scanned the neighborhood for any sign of people. I could see no one and came down.

All India Radio reported the crackdown but details were sketchy. They mentioned that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was alive and he was still a free man in hiding<sup>6</sup>. Around 7:30 in the morning Dacca radio came on air. For the past few days it had been calling itself *Dacca Betar* but this morning it went back to its original call sign 'Radio Pakistan, Dacca'. It did not have any news and was playing martial songs and blaring out martial law regulations and instructions. An announcement was made that Lieutenant General Tikka Khan, Yahya Khan's Governor designate for East Pakistan, would be sworn in by the Chief Justice of the Dacca High Court. Earlier the Chief Justice, Justice B. A. Siddiky, had refused to administer the oath.

Later in the day, it was announced that Yahya Khan would address the nation in the evening. Throughout the day, we fiddled with the radio dial searching for news. Almost all international radio news including BBC and the Voice of America reported the crackdown but gave no details. They all seemed to have picked up the story from All India Radio. The international media did not have reporters on the ground in East Pakistan<sup>7</sup>. In the evening, Yahya Khan came on the radio and branded Sheikh Mujibur

<sup>5</sup> The previous night the army declared curfew and soldiers were ordered to shoot on sight any one who stepped outside.

<sup>6</sup> In fact, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was arrested at midnight.

<sup>7</sup> Just before the Pakistan Army launched their infamous "Operation Searchlight" on the night of March 25, they interned some 200 foreign journalists at the Intercontinental Hotel. On the morning of March 26, all of them were driven to the airport and expelled so that they could not see the army's bloody handiwork and on that scale. However, three, Simon Dring, Arnold Zeitlin and Michael Laurent, escaped the dragnet. At the risk of their lives they hid in the lobby, kitchen, laundry, and even in the roof; moving from location to the other for the 32 hours of curfew. On the morning of March 27 when curfew was lifted, Dring, a war correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* of London, went

Rahman and the Awami League as traitors and enemies of Pakistan. If any one had any doubts about the intent of the Pakistan Army, Yahya's speech spelled it out in no uncertain terms that from now on East Pakistan would be under strict military rule. The army could not be criticized and it could do whatever it pleased; its authority was supreme. It could kill, maim, detain or do anything to anyone in East Pakistan 'for the sake of national integrity and security'<sup>8</sup>.

On March 27, curfew was lifted for a couple of hours to allow people to gather provisions. The phones were still dead. We had no news of family members who lived all over Dacca. Of immediate concern were my uncle and his family in Dhanmondi. My father decided that we would first check on him and then try and get whatever provisions we could and then go to my grandmother's in Khaje Dewan.

We piled into the car with my father at the wheel. As we crossed Farm Gate, we saw several dead bodies littered on the streets, like dead animals. Two were dangling from a rickshaw near Holy Cross College. Nearby, a contingent of soldiers stood overlooking the traumatized civilians with stern demeanor. They looked tired from the gory killings of the past two nights. Sanitary trucks of Dacca Municipality were picking up the corpses. Nobody spoke in the car. It did not take us long to reach Road 31.

They were a stunned lot at my uncle's. On the night of March 25/26, soldiers entered their compound and ran through the lawn and went over the wall to enter Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's residence. There was indiscriminate shooting and many bullets hit the house. The family practically hugged the floor for much of the

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out and saw the gruesome killings at Dacca University's Iqbal Hall, Rajarbagh Police Lines and certain parts of old Dacca. He took pictures of what he saw. He reached London shortly afterwards and his report with pictures came out in *The Daily Telegraph* on 30 March, 1971. Anthony Mascarenhas of *The Dawn* arrived in Dacca from West Pakistan sometime later in an army approved journalists' tour of East Pakistan who were to gloss over the army's actions. Their reports were not supposed to show the butchers of Bangladesh in bad light. Mascarenhas however made his own investigations. After reaching Karachi, he first sent his family out of Pakistan and then he left. Mascarenhas' story was published in the *Sunday Times* of London. He later wrote the much acclaimed book *The Rape of Bangladesh* published by Vikas of Delhi in 1972. Dring's and Mascarenhas' reports were the first documentation of the genocide in Bangladesh.

<sup>8</sup> The message was couched in euphemisms.

night. We saw bullet marks in the verandah. After seeing that his brother and his family were physically unhurt, my father started to worry about the others; everyone had to be accounted for. The curfew break was a very small window, just a few hours, so he and my uncle went off to procure provisions. No saying how long this would last. As soon as they left, I told my mother I was going out for a short while. She didn't want me to go but she knew she couldn't hold me back. So, she told me to be careful, fearful that I would get into trouble.

Dacca was a city in panic and nobody knew if any area was safe. People bore blank expressions and looked shocked and scared. Many were leaving their homes to go to another neighborhood with whatever they could carry on them. The area they vacated had other people moving in. Many were leaving Dacca for the countryside.

I wanted to find Sheikh Kamal or information about him. I couldn't enter Road 32 as both ends were sealed off so I walked to Sat Masjid Road and reached the large sports field<sup>9</sup>. At the bus stand, a small detachment of soldiers were keeping an eye on the populace. I had walked past the bus stand a couple of times and this had not escaped the eyes of the Punjabi junior commissioned officer (JCO) who was in charge. He called me over and started asking me questions. My heart froze. I think my answers were incoherent. Before I could say anything else he said "Student? Sit down here!" and made me sit on the pavement. My mind was racing. What will they do to me? My friend, Sajjad Rahman who lived across the street had seen the entire thing from his verandah<sup>10</sup>. What he did next was very brave but also foolhardy. He crossed the street to where the JCO stood and addressed the man in an assertive tone: "Why have you detained him? Let him go! I know him!" and that too in Bengali! he JCO was not impressed and barked back, "What's the matter with you? You don't know any Urdu? You too sit down with him! *Chalo*!" Sajjad sat down meekly. I was now totally shell-shocked. My friends Quazi Ali Anwar (Helal) and Shaukat Osman appeared and were staring at

<sup>9</sup> The field is now known as the Abahani ground.

<sup>10</sup> Dr. Sajjadur Rahman lives in Ottawa and works for the Canadian Government Aid Agency, CIDA.

us but I quietly signaled them with my eyes to keep moving and not stop. They complied. A few minutes later, a 3-ton army truck pulled up. It was packed with civilians; all Bengali men of various ages. The JCO tried to put us on the truck but you couldn't squeeze in an additional child. Frustrated he said in Urdu: "Okay, the next one, then!"

Immediately, my survival instincts took over. If we didn't get away by the time the next truck arrived we would be dead. I got up and addressed the JCO in Urdu: "Sir! I am a *Bihari*; my father migrated here from Patna (India) in 1947 and I am a Khan, sir" and showed him the fake identity card I carried which said I was a clerk in my father's company<sup>11</sup>. Then I began a tirade against Bengalis. The unbridled badmouthing included accusing Bengalis of starting the chaos. "They are inherently treacherous. Bengalis created serious problems for us non-Bengalis. They need to be taught a lesson, sir! The patriotic Pakistan army has saved the nation!" Sajjad was dumbfounded and was staring at me open-mouthed but before he could say anything I said, "And although my friend here is a Bengali, he is a true and loyal Pakistani!" All that nonsense and that too in accent-free Urdu must have been agreeable to the JCO because after what couldn't have been more than a few seconds, but felt like forever, he said: "*Thik hein, tum double se chalay jao!*"

I had never felt more relieved which is why we were a bit slow to start and were walking away when a shout prompted us to start running, half expecting them to shoot us in the back. But nothing happened and Sajjad was inside his house in no time as I sprinted to Shaukat's house in Road 8A. Shaukat told me later he had never seen anyone down two bottles of water in one go. I was in no condition to walk, so Shaukat's father drove me to my uncle's at Road 31.

Once home, I told everyone about my ordeal. I was badly affected. My hands would shake, and I had difficulty swallowing. I saw danger everywhere. Curfew was back in place and along with

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<sup>11</sup> After March 1, many of my friends including me carried ID cards from companies where they had connections through friends and relatives. This was necessary because the army was checking for students and being a student meant trouble of some sort.

curfew came sporadic firing. Every time I heard gunfire my heart would start pounding. That night, I left my room and crept into my parents' bed!

We were stuck inside because of the curfew and the only thing to do was to scan the frequencies on the radio. I could not overcome the thought of what was going to happen to our dreams of freedom and an independent Bangladesh with so much death and destruction. Then, I accidentally tuned into a weak station that could barely be heard and it was calling itself *Shadhin Bangla Betar* (Radio of Free Bengal)! My spirits rose. All was not lost. We had our radio station, but where was it? It announced that Major Ziaur Rahman would come on the air shortly. Who was Major Zia? Ziaur Rahman made his speech in English. He declared Bangladesh an independent country and stated that he was its acting President. Subsequently, he made a modified announcement in which he said he was declaring independence on behalf of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman<sup>12</sup>. Zia's announcement was a great morale booster. At least some Bengali soldiers had revolted and were fighting against the Pakistan Army.

8 East Bengal under Major Ziaur Rahman and EPR under Major Rafiqul Islam fought several pitched battles with the Pakistanis in Chittagong inflicting substantial casualties on the enemy although the trainees and the Chief Instructor of the East Bengal Regimental Centre, Lieutenant Colonel M. R. Chowdhury were killed on the night of March 25/26. One significant battle was in the Kalurghat bridge area where the Pakistanis airlifted a commando battalion in helicopters for the operation<sup>13</sup>. General Mittha who had been in East Pakistan since the Larkana meeting

<sup>12</sup> Two years later when I was Ziaur Rahman's ADC, I asked him about the declaration of independence. He responded by saying that he was the second-in-command of 8 East Bengal and revolted when he found out that his commanding officer had laid a trap to murder him and his troops when he was sent to the port to unload a ship. After revolting, 8 East Bengal took up positions near the Kalurghat Bridge where a transmission station of the Radio Pakistan was located. Soldiers of 8 East Bengal secured the transmission station and asked the leaders of Chittagong Awami League to make the declaration of independence. After much debate, neither Mr. M. A. Hannan nor Mr. M. R. Siddiqui who were elected representatives of the people from Chittagong agreed to make the announcement for fear of retribution on their families. Only then, the task fell on Ziaur Rahman.

<sup>13</sup> Lieutenant Shamsheer Mobin Chowdhury, older brother of my classmate Shahan, was injured in this battle and was captured by the Pakistan Army.

personally commanded the Pakistanis in this operation. He was ably assisted by a Bengali officer, Major Abdul Mannan, who was picked up by helicopter from Comilla by Mittha<sup>14</sup>.

In Dacca, the following morning, curfew broke for a couple of hours and again the same scene: people scrambling from one neighborhood to another; stocking up on provisions; thousands leaving the city in a mass exodus; and so on. And every night there was gun fire. Details of the dreadful night of March 25/26 began to emerge.

The Pakistan army had demolished the Central Shaheed Minar in the Dacca University campus as if that would wipe away its glorious history. There were big firefights in the East Pakistan Rifles (EPR) barracks in Peelkhana and the Rajarbagh Police Lines where the Pakistan Army attacked Bengali border guards and policemen. Then, there were the mass killings. Shankhari Patti, Hazaribagh and other Hindu areas of Dacca received the worst treatment. Iqbal Hall and Jagganath Hall were principal targets of wrath in the Dacca University campus. No one was spared. Teachers and students met the same fate. My cousin's husband, Dr. Muqtadir, a professor in the geology Department and a House Tutor in Iqbal Hall was dragged out of his residence and shot in front of his pregnant wife. Dr. G. C. Dev, a professor of philosophy and provost of Jagganath Hall was also dragged out of his home and shot. I had a soft corner for Dr. Dev. Two years ago, I had heard him speak on the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad. He had such great knowledge about Islam and other religions and spoke with such eloquence about the prophet's virtues that no Muslim cleric I knew could match it. Yet, they killed him. After the mass killings of the night of March 25/26, the army began a mission of targeted killings which continued throughout the 9-month liberation war. Mr. R. P. Saha, a great philanthropist and founder of Bharateswari Homes (a free boarding school for girls) and Kumudini Hospital (a free charitable hospital for the poor),

<sup>14</sup> Abubakar Osman Mittha, *Unlikely Beginnings*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2003, and Muntasir Mamoon, *Pakistani Generalder Mon: Bangali Bangladesh Muktiuddah*, Dhaka: Shomoy Prokashon, 2010. Major Mannan later served as minister under both Ershad and Khaleda Zia. A businessman, he is currently vice president of a political party called Bikalpa Dhara.

and a son were killed after they were picked up from their home in Narayanganj<sup>15</sup>.

The Pakistan Army was conducting genocide on the Bengalis of East Pakistan while the world stood in silence. Up until that point, India was the only country that had condemned the Pakistanis and was talking about our plight. The Guinness Book of World Records termed the mass killings of the Pakistan Army in Bangladesh as one of the top five genocides of the twentieth century, comparable to the Nazi extermination of Jews in Europe. Thousands of people were killed by the Pakistan Army in Dacca and surrounding areas on the night of March 25/26 alone. Everyone I knew seemed to have lost a relative or an acquaintance<sup>16</sup>.

The atrocities and the exodus out of Dacca continued. As soon as the curfew broke, one would see thousands of people, men, women, children, old and young streaming out of the city on foot carrying whatever they could take with them. Many perished on the way.

After securing the major cities and towns, the army began 'search and sweep' operations in the countryside from mid April, which was simply a euphemism for mass killings in specific areas. Jinjira, a sleepy community on the southern bank of the River Buriganga, was attacked. In the pre-dawn operation, mortars and recoilless rifles were used to soften the 'target' before machine guns opened up on the main residential sections of Jinjira where most of the homes were made of bamboo thatch<sup>17</sup>. The indiscriminate firing continued for several hours and by the time the Pakistan Army was done, five thousand people were dead. Among the victims were Mrs. Hamidullah and her young son. They had left the city to seek refuge in a safe locality. Mr. Hamidullah was a banker and a friend of my parents.

<sup>15</sup> R. P. Saha was killed on May 17, 1971.

<sup>16</sup> G. W. Choudhury, *The Last Days of United Pakistan*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974. Choudhury, a Bengali and a member of Yahya Khan's cabinet, reports in his book that he told Yahya after a visit to Dacca that every family in East Pakistan had lost someone in the hands of the Pakistan Army. In response, Yahya kept silent.

<sup>17</sup> Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1977. The Jinjira operation was initiated at the behest of a Muslim League politician who had a land dispute with some locals of Jinjira. He informed the Pakistan Army that Jinjira was infested with *Mukti Bahini* and the army did the rest.

Three of my maternal uncles and their families along with my grandparents left Dacca on their way to Austogram, their ancestral home. They could only go as far as Narsingdhi when they came under air attack from Sabre jets of the Pakistan Air Force. The strafing continued for several hours and when it was over, dead bodies were littered everywhere. My uncles and their families saved themselves by hiding under a bridge. They somehow managed to get back to Dacca terrorized and traumatized. From my uncles, I heard that they had seen elements of 2 East Bengal under Major Safiullah in Narsingdhi.

In March 1971, there were quite a few Bengali military officers who were posted in East Pakistan. They were being re-assigned to West Pakistan. Most who were not in a battalion of the East Bengal Regiment or the EPR complied and very few revolted and joined the liberation struggle. Several members of my greater family were officers of the Pakistan Army and all of them went back to Pakistan. One day I visited my aunt's home in Central Road in Dhanmondi where I ran into my mother's cousin, Captain Mahbub Elahi Chowdhury, the younger brother of Professors Kabir Chowdhury and Munier Chowdhury. He was getting ready to deposit his shotgun to the police station complying with the orders of the military government<sup>18</sup>. I asked him if he was going to join the *Mukti Bahini*. He was surprised at my question and advised me to be careful. I did not pursue the issue further and quickly left the place. These Bengali military-men remained loyal to their oath of allegiance to the Pakistan Army.

By now, news of resistance by Bengali soldiers of East Bengal Regiment, EPR and other para-military forces began to reach Dacca. 4 East Bengal under Major Khaled Mosharraf had revolted and was fighting in the Brahmanbaria area<sup>19</sup>. They were

<sup>18</sup> Quazi Nooruzzaman, *A Sector Commander Remembers the Bangladesh Liberation War 1971*, Dhaka: Writer's Ink, 2010. Colonel M. A. G. Osmany's shotguns were deposited by a nephew after he had crossed over to India. Osmany had sent a special message for this purpose. He was complying with the orders of the Pakistan Army even after he had fled the country.

<sup>19</sup> 4 East Bengal revolted in Brahmanbaria under Major Shafayet Jamil. The second-in-command Major Khaled Mosharraf was in Shamshearnagar with other elements of the battalion. Before the revolt, Shafayet Jamil and Khaled Mosharraf were in radio contact.



able to get out of Comilla Cantonment largely unscathed since they had been broken up into company sized groups and deployed at multiple locations. 1 East Bengal was stationed in Jessore Cantonment and its soldiers had just returned from a field exercise and were sleeping after depositing their weapons in the armory when their barracks were attacked by elements of 25 Baluch and 22 Frontier Force. The battalion extricated itself out of Jessore Cantonment under the leadership of Captain Hafizuddin and Lieutenant Anwar<sup>20</sup>. 3 East Bengal met a similar fate in Saidpur Cantonment when their barracks were attacked by 14 Frontier Force and 23 Field Regiment Artillery in the dead of night when they were asleep. This battalion got out of Saidpur Cantonment under Captain Anwar Hossain's leadership. Both these battalions were badly mauled and lost almost half their men and equipment as they extricated themselves out of the cantonment. The EPR under Major Osman took control of Kushtia in the southwestern part of the country and was vigorously resisting the Pakistan Army's effort to retake the area.

After the fateful night of March 25/26, most Awami League leaders were on the run. They knew that the Pakistan army would be hunting for them. Tajuddin Ahmed, the General Secretary of the party, was the first senior member among Mujib's close associates to cross over to India. Tajuddin Ahmed crossed the border near Chuadanga with Amirul Islam, a prominent barrister, on March 30. On his arrival in Calcutta, one of the first things Tajuddin Ahmed did was to look for one Chittaranjan Sutar. The address he had was 26 Prasad Road. The BSF was conducting Tajuddin Ahmed and they could neither find Sutar nor any Prasad Road in Calcutta. Tajuddin Ahmed did not know that Sutar had changed his name to Bhujanga Bhushan Roy to hide his true identity and the address should have said Rajendra Road instead of Prasad Road as the road was named

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<sup>20</sup> The Pakistani units tried to disarm 1 East Bengal. Immediately, soldiers of 1 East Bengal revolted. They fought for 8 hours before extricating out of the cantonment. Lieutenant Anwar embraced martyrdom while leading his men out of Jessore Cantonment. Captain Hafizuddin led the unit to safety and fought the entire liberation war with his unit. After retiring from the army, he joined politics and became a minister in Khaleda Zia's government.

after India's first President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad who was popularly known as Rajendra in Calcutta<sup>21</sup>.

On April 3, Tajuddin Ahmed met the Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi in Delhi. In addition to asking for recognition of Bangladesh, he sought military assistance to carry on with the armed struggle as well as help for the refugees who were arriving in India by tens of thousands every day. Indira Gandhi assured Tajuddin of all assistance within India's ability and impressed upon him the necessity to form a provisional government so that India's assistance to Bangladesh could be on a government to government basis. On his return to Calcutta, Tajuddin Ahmed found that he was being severely criticized by Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni and Tofayel Ahmed, both former student leaders and now leaders of the Awami League's youth arm. Moni was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's nephew and therefore had quite a clout with Awami Leaguers. Their reason for annoyance was that Tajuddin Ahmed went to meet Mrs. Gandhi without meeting Sutar first. They were also vehemently against the formation of a provisional government which Tajuddin had agreed to do. The youth leaders were in favor of creating a revolutionary council and not a provisional government<sup>22</sup>.

Senior Awami League leaders began to arrive in India through various border routes. A. H. M. Kamaruzzaman and Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury were in Calcutta. Starting on April 10, Tajuddin Ahmed went all over the border areas in a cargo aircraft picking up Awami League leaders along the way. He picked up Syed Nazrul Islam from across the Mymensingh border. Meanwhile, most Awami politicians had managed to cross into

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<sup>21</sup> S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2005. In 1963, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman took a secret trip to Agartala and met the Chief Minister of Tripura, Satindranath Sinha to gauge the willingness of the Nehru Government to help Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his party as they strived for rights of Bengalis in Pakistan. The Nehru Government promised support but did not want publicity of this arrangement. To that end, a Hindu Awami Leaguer from Barisal, Chittaranjan Sutar was made to settle in Calcutta as a liaison between the Awami League and the Indian authorities. Sutar's main contacts in India were with the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. The opposition of the youth leaders to the idea of a provisional government was so vehement that a letter with 43 signatories was sent to Mrs. Gandhi to stop Tajuddin Ahmed from forming the provisional government.

Indian Territory on their own. Colonel Osmany had reached Agartala without his distinctive moustache. Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed had crossed the border in a *burka* and was also in Agartala. Mushtaque made it known that he should be made the Prime Minister given his seniority over the others in the party. After much bickering and haggling, the senior Awami Leaguers persuaded Mushtaque to accept a cabinet position.

On April 17, the Provisional Government of Bangladesh took its oath of office in a mango orchard in Meherpur, Kushtia which was now being called Mujibnagar. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was declared President of the new republic and Syed Nazrul Islam the Acting President<sup>23</sup>. Tajuddin Ahmed took over the affairs of the provisional government as Prime Minister. Other members of the cabinet were Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed (Foreign Minister), A. H. M. Kamaruzzaman (Minister for Home) and Mansur Ali (Finance Minister). Colonel M. A. G. Osmany was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the *Mukti Bahini*. The event took place in front of the international media and we heard it on the radio. This was a morale boosting event for Bengalis trapped inside the country. At least, we were getting organized and I felt that from now on the going shall get tough for the Pakistan Army. The Bengalis were fighting back.

From early April, the Pakistan Army started to move out of the cantonment cities to take control of the entire province. Siddiq Salik (1977) describes how these operations actually took place. Typically, a Pakistani army column would move along a major highway/axis and when they reached the vicinity of a habitation, artillery and mortar shells would soften the villages before the infantry brought in automatic fire and 'neutralized the village', killing most of its habitants. Some villagers did manage to escape but many became victims of stampede while others got detached from family members. This went on throughout the month of April.

By now, I had overcome my fear and started to go out during the day. News of the killings and intimidation was becoming unbearable. How do you show sympathy to a family who lost a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

loved one when everyone in your immediate family was still walking? As the Pakistan Army fanned out to the countryside, reports of atrocities, mass killings and mass rapes started to trickle in. No place in East Pakistan was safe for Bengalis. Some time in the second half of April, as I was chatting with the neighborhood boys it dawned on me that we were living the life of the dead. At any time, any one of us could be killed if a soldier of the Pakistan Army felt like it. We had no rights, no legal protection. They had already shown us their appetite for Bengali blood and what they thought of us. Staying at home was no guarantee of a safe life. The way I saw it, we were dead either way. If we choose to fight, we may get an independent Bangladesh and in the process some of us may die the death of a martyr; and if we did not do anything and remained the way we were, we could be shot in our homes simply because we were Bengalis. I made up my mind; I was going to join the *Mukti Bahini*.

In Dacca, curfew hours were reduced and imposed only from dusk to dawn. Using the guard's bicycle, I would go out and see my friends, Bashir and Habibul Alam who lived in the Eskaton-Dilu Road area. Sometimes we would go to the Rajshahi House in Maghbazar to see Lichang and his brother, Qayyum<sup>24</sup>. In one of those visits, I bumped into Shahed Sheikh, a non-Bengali businessman. The previous year, Shahed had directed an English play in which I had acted. He was in high spirits and understandably pleased with the actions of the Pakistan Army. Shahed showed no sympathy for the plight of Bengalis and was dismissive of the Bengali struggle. In a ridiculing tone he asked me, "Are you one of those people who are waiting for a monsoon miracle?"<sup>25</sup> I felt like assaulting him but kept my temper.

When I was with Bashir and Alam, we would often discuss about joining the *Mukti Bahini* but had no idea how. Lichang knew about our plans and sometime in the last week of April, he told us that our friend Ali Ziauddin (Zia) had gone across the border and

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<sup>24</sup> Lichang and his brother left Dacca for Karachi the following month. They escaped from Pakistan and returned to Bangladesh after liberation.

<sup>25</sup> Many among the entrapped civilian population in Dacca felt that the Pakistan Army would lose considerable mobility during the monsoon floods to the advantage of the *Mukti Bahini*. Such drawing room discussions were quite common at that time and the expected *Mukti Bahini* advantage was termed as the 'monsoon miracle'.

met the freedom fighters of 4 East Bengal under Major Khaled Musharaf. Zia was now in Dacca to recruit volunteers and he would be in Rajshahi House the following day. When we met, Zia told us about life in the Motinagar *Mukti Bahini* Camp.

"Would you like to go" he asked us.

Immediately, Alam and I responded, "Yes!"

Zia asked us to try and recruit as many volunteers as we could, adding that we should be careful so that nothing gets leaked out. Zia planned to leave in 2-3 days.

We did not have much time. There would be no formal goodbyes with family members. I recruited my senior friend from Testuri Bazar, Helal Kabir Chowdhury whom I fondly called *Ustad*. Zia recruited my cousins Mohammad Saifullah (Shamol) and Ahmed Munier Chowdhury (Bhashon)<sup>26</sup>. There were six of us including Zia, our friend, philosopher, and guide as well as our leader for this arduous journey. The plan was to travel in pairs; Ustad and I would be one pair, Shamol was paired with Bhashon and Zia and Alam would be the third pair. Although we would all be traveling together, we would pretend that we didn't know the others. Rendezvous would be at the Hatkhola Bus Stand at 7:30 in the morning. Zia had told us to use attire that would not set us apart from the crowd.

The first problem was money. I was treasurer of a cultural club called *Aegeans* and Lichang was president so I asked him if I could use the four / five hundred rupees of the club I had on me. He said yes. I also took one hundred rupees from my father's wallet and another hundred from my mother's purse, obviously without their knowledge. Besides, the others would bring some money as well. The next item on my 'to do list' was to see Shikha before I left. For the past few days, she was staying with my cousin in their government officers' quarter in Kakrail because it was considered

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<sup>26</sup> Genocide and war were splitting families. In one family, one brother could be supporting the liberation movement while other remained loyal to Pakistan. Joining the liberation war was not an option for some because it could put livelihoods in jeopardy. For instance, a couple of days earlier, Shamol's elder brother and his brother-in-law as well as Bhashon's uncles, all army officers posted in East Pakistan, reported to their new postings in West Pakistan only to be repatriated back after being interned for 2 years in Pakistan.

to be a safe place. The day before our departure I went to see her. She had no idea what was going on and I did not give her any indication of my intentions. This was the only way I could bid her farewell.

On the appointed day, I woke up early and wrote a cryptic note for my family saying that “I am going off to save my mother” and left it on my desk. Ustad and I reached the Hatkhola Bus Stand before the appointed time. Zia and Alam had already arrived. All of us wore ordinary cotton trousers and Hawaiian shirts trying to appear as villagers who had come to the city for some job. Shamol and Bhashon were the last to arrive. They were both wearing *lungis* and were having difficulty managing their garment. Bhashon had chosen a high collared red shirt with buttoned down collar with his *lungi*. As if their clothes were not enough to give them away, Bhashon carried a couple of English paperbacks under one arm. Even though we were dumbfounded, we had to laugh. In the bus we sat in pairs but Bhashon would come up and check on the other pairs in English. When we reached Daudkandi, he sidled up, looked the other way and said in English, “Perhaps we can have lunch on the other side of the river”. And each time he spoke in English I would feel agitated. At one point he was even singing English songs! Given this circus, we trashed the ‘pair concept’ and after crossing the Meghna River, decided to move together as a group and avoid buses and ferries. We used auto rickshaws and country boats for the rest of the journey. It’s a wonder that no hostile eyes saw anything unusual and we didn’t get caught. It was a bleak, cloudy day, drizzling often and the army was not out in full force patrolling the area. We saw some trucks going by but they were not checking anything. By the time we reached Chandina just short of Comilla Cantonment it was really pouring. This was last week of April and the *kal boishakhi* season had just begun<sup>27</sup>.

We hired three rickshaws and soon we were being pedaled deep into the countryside towards the border. There was traffic. People were on the move, most running away from what they perceived as danger. Others were returning home after being

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<sup>27</sup> *Kal boishakhi* is nor’wester thunderstorm of Bengal that take place in late afternoons or early evenings in the summer.

dislocated by military action. Soon it was dark and the *kal boishakhi* was getting worse. Should we continue in the darkness and inclement weather? Opinion was divided but the rickshaw-pullers took the matter off our hands when they stopped at a village, their village, and refused to proceed further. Now, what do we do?

We walked up to a homestead that seemed prosperous by rural standards and knocked. A man opened the door. We told him politely that we needed shelter for the night and he let us in without a word! They were good and generous people. A room was vacated for us in no time. He gave each one of us a dry *lungi* so that we could get out of our wet clothes and hang them to dry. We bathed under the tube well and were getting ready to retire for the night when we were surprised with an offer for dinner. They had cooked specially for us: rice, egg curry, lentils and vegetables. To top it off, at the end of the meal, each of us got a bowl of milk. We offered money for the dinner but they would have none of it. The man said this was least they could do given what we were doing. How did he guess that we were going off to join the *Mukti Bahini*? He told us to sleep without worry because the place was deep in the interior, quite far away from all major roads. "And you have a lot to do in the morning," the man said knowingly.

In the morning, we got *chira* (beaten rice) and *gur* (molasses) for breakfast. After breakfast, we thanked our hosts and started for the border. From time to time we would ask the locals: "How far is the border?" And they'd say, "Just a bit, about two miles more." This happened three or four times. The distance never seemed to reduce. (Later with experience of wandering in the villages of Bangladesh, I learnt that village folks always respond to all queries of distance with the same response '2 miles' irrespective of how far you have to go.). After walking for a couple of hours we could sense we were close to the border. We were walking in a single file on the *aeels*<sup>28</sup> just outside a village when we bumped into two human 'giants' or so they appeared to me. One had a *gamchha* tied around his head while the other fellow had one around his waist. On the ground at their feet was a machine gun of some kind. A third soldier was inside a trench. We had blundered into the defenses of 4 East Bengal!

<sup>28</sup> *Aeels* are raised earthen dams that hold water in paddy fields.

I cannot describe the emotion of seeing these Bengali soldiers, tall and strong, armed and ready. They didn't seem scared of the Pakistan Army like the citizens of Dacca. My God, I thought, we have people like this to fight! When they saw us they took some light-hearted dig. "So you are university students? Where are you going now? Come here! We'll teach you how to fight a war!" They were laughing but we did not take offense because this was the first time since the crackdown, I felt we had seen something to celebrate no matter how small. The soldiers offered us water and we rested there for a while. They gave us directions to Motinagar on the Indian side of the border and told us where to find the Indian Border Security Force's (BSF) Border Outpost (BOP) who would direct us to 4 East Bengal. "Report to Subedar Major Idris" said their leader.

After walking for a while we crossed a border pillar and were ecstatic. Most of us jumped over the imaginary line separating the territories of East Pakistan and the Indian State of Tripura. A short walk later, we reached Motinagar BOP. The BSF khaki uniform was slightly different than the khaki of the Pakistani Army. They also wore jungle hats and had anklets over their jungle boots. We all expected that the BSF would have a reception center for potential *Mukti Bahini* volunteers but that was not the case. The BSF officer in charge was polite but did not let us enter the BOP. He told us to stay close by because freedom fighters usually passed by several times a day and they would know what to do with us. Opposite the BOP there was a village tea stall. The offerings were limited. We ordered *parathas* and *roshogollas* which we washed down with thick sweet tea. After the snack as we were waiting, the BSF sent word that a *Mukti* vehicle was coming down the road.

It was an M-38 jeep with its windshield flat on the hood. We hailed them and they stopped. The occupants were armed, some with automatic weapons. The person sitting in the front on the passenger side looked like an officer. He wore an olive T-shirt with his khaki trousers. A sub-machinegun was resting next to him. Then someone recognized him as Lieutenant Fazlul Kabir a.k.a. Mona Bhai, a couple of years our senior in Dacca University. He was commissioned in the Pakistan Army in 1970. His home was in Gandaria, Dacca. After the pleasantries and inquiries, he agreed to take us to the *Mukti Bahini* camp in his jeep but he had to finish his business in the BOP first.



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## *Mukti Bahini*

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After finishing his work in the BOP, Kabir invited us into his jeep. There were six of us and he had four soldiers with him. There wasn't enough room for eleven people and it was a tight fit with some of us just getting toeholds but we held on as the vehicle moved on the dirt road through the green hills of Tripura. A short while later, we saw a military tent pitched by the side of a newly made dirt road where armed sentries stopped us at the entrance. After verification, they let us proceed. The place was very well camouflaged, we did not see too many tents or bivouac areas. We could see soldiers of 4 East Bengal going about their work. Some wore the same khaki military uniforms as the Pakistan Army; others were dressed like Kabir. Most had a *gamchha* tied around the head or waist or both. On a groundsheet, a small group was cleaning weapons. Some were carrying ammunition boxes. Everybody was busy. I had an indescribable feeling of pride. These soldiers were once part of the Pakistan Army and now they had revolted risking everything to stand by their brethren.

We drove for a mile or so before the jeep came to a halt. Under a tree, seated on some improvised bamboo furniture, we saw a small group of men hunched over a map. Kabir introduced us to Captain Mahbubur Rahman<sup>1</sup>, who sported a beard, and Lieutenant Didarul Alam. They were working with some new volunteer fighters. Training new volunteers was Captain Haider's responsibility but

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<sup>1</sup> Captain Mahbubur Rahman joined 1 East Bengal when it was reorganized under 'Z' Force a short while later. He was martyred in the battle of Kanaihat in the last week of November when he was repulsing a Pakistani counter attack. He was awarded *Bir Uttam* posthumously.

he was in the hospital to mend an injured arm. Haider was a former SSG officer<sup>2</sup>. In his absence, Mahbub was looking after the new arrivals. Mahbub welcomed us to the *Mukti Bahini* and said that Haider would be back in a day or two.

Introductions over, we were sent to Subedar Major Idris who was processing new volunteers so the cookhouse (*Langar*) could get rations for them. He was taking the volunteers' details to enter them in the *Mukti Bahini* rolls. When my turn came, he asked the usual questions; name, next of kin, permanent address, et cetera. When I said that my name was Abdul Qayyum Khan, he looked up.

"Do you want to keep the 'Khan'?" he asked. "After all, we are fighting the Khans."

I told him it was my family name and I could not change it any more than he could.

"Yes, but why do you want to keep it when we are fighting the 'Khan Army'?" He went on without giving up.

"I am not here to sell the name of my father and forefathers!" I said testily. "Put down 'Khan' please!"

He saw no future in the argument and relented. That done, we were told to go to the Dacca Platoon. The platoon was made up of student volunteers from Dacca. Its bivouac area was on a hilltop on one side of the camp. One tent provided shelter for about forty people and it wasn't even a proper tent; just a large tarpaulin hoisted on bamboo poles. It didn't look like it could sleep forty.

It seemed that this side of the camp was earmarked for new volunteers. Every day, they trickled in, most of them young men from villages. There were some students from the colleges in Comilla area. In Comilla Platoon, we were surprised to find Ibrahim, a former domestic help of our companion, Helal. Ibrahim's village was just across the border. He was about our age and had volunteered for the *Mukti Bahini* the previous week. Ibrahim was delighted to see us and immediately got busy fixing up our sleeping spots. He was very eager to take care of us; he'd rustle up food or a green coconut from somewhere and bring it to

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<sup>2</sup> Commandos in Pakistan Army were known as SSG (Special Service Group). Initially, the SSGs were trained by the Rangers of the US Army.

us. We told him to stop it because it would not make us popular and him even less if people found out we had a help doing our chores. Ibrahim would not agree. His family had worked for Helal's for three generations and now in these trying times if he did not take care of Helal what would he tell his folks at home? Gently but firmly, we impressed upon him that things had changed and we were all equals here. However, if he wanted he could help us with our laundry. And he agreed.

In Dacca Platoon, we met people we knew from Dacca University. Notable among them was Aziz, a former Vice President (VP) of Dacca College Students Union and a Chhatra League leader. Fateh Ali and Maya were also in Dacca Platoon. A couple of days later, Shahidullah Khan Badal came to Motinagar. We were some of the youngest in Dacca Platoon; most of the others were senior to us academically. That evening, we got our first taste of the *Langar* cuisine. People lined up in front of the cookhouse tent for just one helping of rice, lentils and vegetables; really horrible stuff. We received our share in our *shanki* that we had bought earlier<sup>3</sup>. Others were using cut up grenade boxes as plates. As I took my first bite, I almost lost a tooth. The rice had tiny pebbles and stone chips in it and one had to sift through before taking a mouthful. The vegetable curry was a slurry of God knows what. Nobody complained. We got three meals a day. Lunch and dinner were the same fare although once or twice a week, little strips of mutton would be thrown into the vegetable slurry. Breakfast was a *puri* and a mug of very sweet tea.

Subedar Major Idris told us that our training would start after Haider returned. In the meantime we should organize our bivouac area as best as we could. "You can go into the surrounding jungle and collect bamboo and other construction materials for your needs," he said. Immediately, Alam took over. He was a rover scout and knew a lot about setting up camp. He was also very tough physically and could single handedly do the work of several men. Under Alam's guidance, we built steps to our hill top shelter and made racks for our utensils and personal effects. We made the place as livable as we could.

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<sup>3</sup> Earthen bowl used by poor villagers of Bengal. Zia insisted we get them otherwise we may not have a utensil to eat from.

In spite of the hardship, people were in high spirits. Everyone seemed to have a sense of humor, cracking jokes and monkeying around. With each passing day, our survival skills and instincts got better. And whenever we got an opportunity, we would go to the tea stall in Motinagar and have *roshogollas* and *parathas*. Some resourceful people collected wild bananas and exchanged them for other edibles or for cigarettes. A boiled egg was the most sought after item. We discovered jackfruit to be the most economical. To treat the entire platoon we needed only two or three and would often pitch in and buy some.

We heard about the miraculous survival story of Lieutenant Imamuzzam Chowdhury. He was one class senior to me in Residential Model School before he transferred to Fuazdarhat Cadet College. In 1970, he was commissioned as an artillery officer in the Pakistan Army and was posted in Comilla. On the night of March 25/26, his non-Bengali commanding officer ordered all the Bengali officers of his unit, including Imam, into an office room and had the room locked from the outside. Sometime past midnight, a JCO fired several bursts from his Sten gun through a window. Imam was hit by several bullets and lost consciousness. His captors thought he was dead. After he regained consciousness, he somehow escaped through a window. The sentry fired several times but missed. Severely wounded and bleeding, Imam ran through Comilla Cantonment and then swam across the Gumti River before collapsing in a village. The villagers took him to the *Mukti Bahini*. He was recuperating in an Indian army hospital and would soon join 4 East Bengal.

Before abandoning their strongholds inside the country, wherever possible, the *Mukti Bahini* with the help of local officials and bank personnel emptied as many government treasuries as they could<sup>4</sup>. Money was taken out by the 'truckloads'. The largest hauls were from Pabna, Bogra, Brahmanbaria and Rangamati. These monies were to be handed over to the provisional government. In most cases most of the money was indeed given to the authorities. However, there were a few instances where

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<sup>4</sup> The National Bank of Pakistan functioned as treasury outside the capital. According to Faruk Aziz Khan, *Spring 1971*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1993; seventy million rupees were deposited with the provisional government.

individuals did not turn in the entire haul. How much they pocketed was never accounted for. The names of such individuals were well known at that time. I actually came across some of them in India. They seemed to be way more prosperous than the rest. Subsequently, after liberation the lifestyle of these people supports the claim that they had pocketed a good sum.

Haider returned and our training began. He hadn't fully recovered and his injured arm was still bandaged but that did not stop him from returning to his duties. He was an inspirational leader. Military men seemed different than civilians. They were not whiners. Their attitude was that "this job needs to be done and we'll get it done with whatever we have; no point complaining about what we don't have." They didn't bother about whose feelings were hurt or being personal.

There were shortages everywhere. For one thing, there weren't enough weapons or ammunition for the new volunteers. The paucity of heavy weapons such as mortars, rocket launchers, and machine guns was even more acute. These shortages were inhibiting the capability of the *Mukti Bahini* to launch operations. Haider was a commando and was very good with explosives and that's where he started with us. The first thing he taught us was how to create road blocks by felling trees with explosives. We were also taught how to blow up bridges and culverts. Most of the training was practical where we would actually handle explosives and blow up stuff. Haider emphasized, that at this time, the most important task for us was to disrupt the Pakistan Army's movements in any way we can. We learnt about the essentials of laying an ambush. Haider stressed that whenever possible, we should use road blocks with ambush.

Along with explosive and tactical training, our training on small arms began. The NCO instructors conducted the weapons training but they were not comfortable dealing with university students. Often tricky situations would arise. Two examples would illustrate the nature of the problem. In the Pakistan Army, soldiers of the East Bengal Regiment were taught their craft in Roman Urdu. The NCOs tried to teach us just as they were taught. They began with *kholna-jorna* (stripping and assembling). Our NCO instructor started the class by saying "*Iss purza ko kehta hae...*" (this part is known as...) in Urdu.

"Why are you speaking in Urdu?" we protested immediately.

"Urdu is the army's language!"

"The Pakistan Army's language! This is the Bangladesh army! No Urdu here! And if you don't speak in Bangla we won't listen to you!" we told him.

The complaint reached the Subedar Major. He was not pleased with our 'mutiny' and said the Dacca University boys don't listen to their *ustad* (teacher). "You have to listen to them," he told us. We told him the same thing; why was the NCO speaking to us in Urdu? "We are Bengalis. He is from Noakhali, and if he wants he can even speak in his dialect and we'll try our best to understand, but no Urdu!"

When the Subedar Major's intervention didn't work, the matter went up to Khaled Mosharraf who was greatly amused. "*Shalara*, they are such fools! It has not yet dawned on them that they no longer have to speak in Urdu!" he said, laughing. He immediately issued an order: Henceforth there would be no more communication in Urdu.

One day, Kazi Bhai (late Kazi Kamaluddin) turned up in Motinagar. He was about five years my senior and a classmate of Lieutenant Kabir (Mona). Kazi Bhai was a well known basketball player and had played for the East Pakistan team. He would address Kabir as 'Mona' as he called him all his life and also use the familiar '*tui*'. This did not escape our outraged NCO instructor who called Kazi Bhai aside and told him that he could not do that.

"Lieutenant Kabir may be your friend, but this is the army and you have to address him as 'sir', and use '*apni*' not '*tui*'!"

Kazi Bhai didn't give a damn and Kabir only laughed at their objections.

As we got familiar with the camp and its inhabitants, we discovered that small groups of newly trained recruits were being infiltrated into the country for sabotage. We met many of them. They were mostly village boys who had received two weeks training on pistols and grenades. A group would typically consist of 3-4 members and everyone carried two grenades. The group leader had a pistol. Their task was to find isolated Pakistan Army outposts and attack them with grenades. As soon as they disposed

off their grenades, they were to extricate themselves from the scene. They were not to engage in any other types of fighting. We know very little about these early fighters of the *Mukti Bahini*. Most of them were either killed or captured and then subjected to inhumane torture before being dispatched. Starting in the last week of May, similar groups were sent to Dacca<sup>5</sup>. A member of the Dacca Platoon, Anwar Hossain a.k.a. Anu, was stopped at an army check post near Gopibagh when he had a grenade on his person. Before the soldiers could search him, he sat down by a sewerage drain as if to take a leak. As he squatted he brought out the grenade hid in his underwear and blew up the check post. He did the same thing a couple of days later in Zindabazar lane.

These desperate suicidal missions were necessary so that the Pakistan Army got no respite. Besides, some operations had to be launched so that the population inside the country did not feel that the *Mukti Bahini* was routed from the ground. Most importantly, it gave the *Mukti Bahini* the breathing time it needed to train the new volunteers and reorganize. Trained soldiers of the East Bengal Regiment and the EPR understood the risk in these missions and were reluctant to undertake such desperate operations. The only people who could be sent were the uninitiated and uninformed volunteers mostly from rural and agrarian backgrounds. Most of these early volunteers just sacrificed themselves. They kept the struggle alive through the months of April, May and June and yet nobody knows about these bravest sons of the soil. We don't even know their names.

Whenever we got an opportunity to go to a bazar (marketplace) we would. The nearest was Sonamora Bazar, a small village market near the border. The principal reason was to get some real food. One day, a few of us from the Dacca Platoon went there. While the others went to procure soap, toothpaste, et cetera, two or three of us went into a local eatery and ordered food. As we were having our rice and mutton curry, our friend Aziz from Dacca Platoon joined us. Aziz had a beard. He had just said his prayers at

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<sup>5</sup> The casualties from such operations by Dacca Platoon fighters were negligible compared to their rural counterparts. This was probably due to the education and intelligence of the Dacca Platoon boys who were mostly university and college students. Also, the urban setting of Dacca provided easy cover for the guerillas to escape.

a local mosque and still wore the skull cap along with a checkered scarf around his neck. As he sat down with us, we could sense some sort of commotion. The manager or owner was complaining loudly. Then he appeared at our table and staring at Aziz demanded: "Are you Muslims?"

"Yes," we said.

"You have to leave! Now! Finish your meal outside," said the irate man.

We were trying to eat as fast as we could without getting into an argument when a waiter took away our plates and went outside. We followed him. Then someone brought some banana leaves, and the man dumped our food on those leaves and handed them to us. He then went away grumbling that the plates would now have to be thoroughly washed to regain their purity, sanctity and limpidness. People were staring at us. We finished our meal, paid the shop owner who had no problems accepting our money and left. There were all kinds of sympathy from Indians all over so this was a shocking experience. We decided that henceforth, we would check first if the establishment was 'Hindu only'.

Some of us wanted to visit Agartala, capital of Tripura state. Many well known people of Bangladesh, especially residents of Dacca, had taken refuge there. So one day, with permission, we started for Agartala. This was going to be my first visit there. On our way we saw several refugee camps and stopped in one to see for ourselves the plight of those hapless people. The conditions were appalling. Various types of structures; thatched huts, tents, or just shelters made of polythene sheets dotted the camp. It seemed that the camp just grew bit by bit as more and more refugees arrived. The overall condition was extremely unhygienic. Rains had turned the camp into a muddy slush with a strong stench of human waste. The inhabitants were in dire straits. Most looked frail and famished. Majority were penniless. Children were the worst victims. They looked emaciated with their eyes bulging out of their sockets. The Indian volunteers who worked in the camp told us that there were one or two deaths everyday, most of them children. There was never enough food or medical supplies for all the inhabitants. Sometimes, the camp ran out of dry rations and had it not been for the donations from various Indian charities,



most inhabitants would not even get one meal a day. Notably missing in bringing aid to the refugees were volunteers from Bangladesh.

In Agartala, we could see that the arrival of Bangladeshis had changed the characteristics of the city. It was no longer the sleepy capital of a remote Indian state. It was bustling with people with big crowds at every major intersection. There was a large youth camp in the Polytechnic Institute where many students and prospective volunteers of the *Mukti Bahini* were housed<sup>6</sup>. On one of the upper floors, several Awami League leaders and workers were housed. We had information that one of our relatives, Kalu Chowdhury, who was elected as a Member of the Provincial Assembly (MPA) was staying in the Polytechnic Institute<sup>7</sup>.

Every room in the upper floor was taken over by some Bangladeshi 'VIP'. Several people shared a room. There were several wooden cots in each room; one for each 'guest'. Every bed was reasonably well stocked in terms of mattresses, mosquito nets, bed sheets, et cetera. The place was crowded. Every MNA and MPA had several cronies with them. They didn't seem to be doing anything useful. Most of the conversation we overheard was neither about the war nor about any useful role they could undertake in mitigating the hardships of their fellow citizens in India. They seemed more concerned about finding a suitable rental property for their families. Some were moving to Calcutta. They didn't seem to lack resources. We found Kalu Bhai just as he was getting ready to have lunch. He appeared happy to see us and inquired about our whereabouts. "Oh, *Mukti Bahini*? You want to fight?" he said in mock admiration. "Good, good." As we spoke, lunch was being served; rice, chicken curry, vegetables and lentils. Kalu Bhai and his friends started their meal without inviting us to partake. As they ate, we made small talk. We were all equals in this war but I could see some were more equal than others<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> Youth Camps were holding camps for *Mukti Bahini* volunteers before their training.

<sup>7</sup> Kalu Chowdhury was a cousin to Bhashon, Shamol and me. He was elected from a constituency in Noakhali.

<sup>8</sup> Quazi Nooruzzaman, *A Sector Commander Remembers the Bangladesh Liberation War 1971*, Dhaka: Writer's Ink, 2010. He too had a similar experience. Some Awami Leaders and their families with whom he shared a room went about their meals of improved diet without him.

The refugee problem was getting severe by the day. Every day tens of thousands of people were crossing over to India with only what they could carry on their heads<sup>9</sup>. Many were old and infirm and needed immediate medical attention. There were young children with every refugee family. Children were the most vulnerable. The refugees required food, housing, medical care, and emergency supplies. International assistance for the refugees had started to come in but it was never sufficient to meet the needs. The attitude of the Nixon Administration to the Bangladesh issue was reflected in US government assistance for the refugees: apathy for their plight. However, the assistance increased significantly after Senator Edward Kennedy's visit to the refugee camps in August. He persuaded the US Senate to increase the quantum of help. And his advocacy in favor of the people of Bangladesh swung US public opinion.

India was having an extremely difficult time coping with the refugees. Its resources were being stretched to the limit. In some locations, Indian citizens had expressed resentment at the invasion of their towns and villages by Bangladeshi refugees. Although the majority public opinion in India was still overwhelmingly in favor of their Government's decision to support and assist the Bangladesh struggle, there was no telling when any untoward incident could change all that. Saboteurs were plenty, given that Pakistani intelligence agencies, such as the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI), had been working with several Indian secessionist movements in states surrounding Bangladesh for several years<sup>10</sup>. Domestically, it was, therefore, important for Indira Gandhi to keep public opinion favorable for Bangladesh.

In 1971, before the influx of refugees, the Indian Government was trying its hardest to quell the Naxalbari Movement in West Bengal. It was an armed insurrection by pro-Chinese leftist guerillas. The Naxals had connections with pro-Chinese political elements of East Pakistan especially the Purbo Banglar Communist Party and Sorbohara Party. This was a matter of grave concern for

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<sup>9</sup> United Nation High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) estimated that 10 million refugees crossed over to India during this period.

<sup>10</sup> ISI was helping the secessionist movements of the Mizos and Nagas by giving them training, weapons and sanctuary.

the Indira Government. What would happen if the weapons given to the *Mukti Bahini* ended up with Naxals? Even worse, what if some of the newly trained and armed *Mukti Bahini* volunteers bolster the ranks of the Naxals<sup>11</sup>? Hence, there was need for a recruitment policy for the *Mukti Bahini* that would ensure that the weapons, ammunition and personnel do not end up with the Naxals. Throughout the liberation war, no *Mukti Bahini* weapons or personnel went to the Naxals. As a matter of fact, there were no significant incidents where *Mukti Bahini* men were involved in criminal activities in the Indian states surrounding Bangladesh.

Given the potential of the Bangladesh issue to destabilize India, the Indira Government, therefore, sought an early resolution of the situation. To that end, Indira Gandhi asked the opinion of her Generals. After careful consideration, General Sam Manekshaw, the Chief of Staff of the Indian Army, advised his prime minister that the earliest that the Indian military could effectively bring the Bangladesh conflict to a successful conclusion would be November. Offensive military operations in Bangladesh would require massive bridging operations. That would be a colossal engineering task requiring meticulous planning. Some major units required for the operation in Bangladesh would have to be relocated and re-trained. These preparations would have to be in such a manner so that it did not compromise India's military capabilities in the western border with Pakistan. By November, the Himalayan passes freeze and that would prevent large scale military movement through these passes. This would effectively keep the Chinese away from directly intervening in the conflict. Manekshaw was against any hasty action which could have disastrous consequences on the ground.

Indira Gandhi did not impose any artificial time table on the military. She accepted Sam Manekshaw's recommendation that offensive operations by the Indian Army would not start before November. She gave the army the go ahead to start preparations. Around the same time, the provisional government of Bangladesh decided to raise a guerilla army of a hundred thousand strong. Given the willingness and enthusiasm of thousands of young men

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<sup>11</sup> Pro-Chinese leftist groups of East Pakistan did not support the liberation war because Peking had taken a position in favor of Pakistan.

to join the *Mukti Bahini*, finding recruits was not going to be a problem. The task of training and equipping the *Mukti Bahini* was going to be a massive undertaking. The Indian Army was the only organization who could undertake this mission. Accordingly, the task to train the *Mukti Bahini* was given to the Indian Army which started immediately.

Given the concerns with the Naxalbari movement, only those without any leftist inclinations or associations could be recruited<sup>12</sup>. The task of selecting volunteers was given to four student leaders, namely, Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni, Abdur Razzak, Tofayel Ahmed, and Sirajul Alam Khan and Professor Yousuf Ali was in-charge of the youth camps. These student leaders practically had no knowledge about guerrilla warfare. They were very active in organizing demonstrations and symbolic events such as rifle drills et cetera during March. According to Karim (2005), none of these four individuals had even read the writings of Mao-Tse-Tung or Che Guevara. They had no idea how to recruit volunteers for a guerilla army that would be launched into battle immediately after training. The reason for this choice was the claim that Sheikh Mujibur Rahman had entrusted them in January to organize resistance against the Pakistanis if negotiations failed. The problem was that the situation on the ground had changed considerably after March 25/26.

The system that emerged was that all volunteers for the *Mukti Bahini* would initially be housed in youth camps where they would receive motivational and physical training. The youth camps were run by the youth leaders of Awami League, i.e., Chhatra League. During their stay in the youth camp, volunteers were screened before being sent for training. The criteria for screening were completely judgmental. The politicians tended to select people from their home districts/sub-divisions/area without any consideration to the individual's ability. Consequently, the *Mukti Bahini* was not tapping into the best volunteers and this was impeding the *Mukti Bahini's* ability. My impression of the youth

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<sup>12</sup> In reality, there was no way to conduct an effective screening of leftist volunteers. Consequently, only well-known leftist student volunteers were prevented from joining the *Mukti Bahini*. One of the people who had to leave the *Mukti Bahini* due to this policy was Shahidullah Khan Badal. He was a member of the pro-Chinese student-Party, East Pakistan Students Union (EPSU Menon).

camp in Agartala was that it was rife with nepotism and cronyism. Many supplies meant for the youth camps were being sold in the bazars of Agartala and money was being pocketed by youth camp leaders.

Raising and organizing the *Mukti Bahini* was not going as well as it should have. The senior commanders including Osmany met for the first time on 2 April in Teliapara tea estate<sup>13</sup>. There was considerable disagreement among the commanders on what needed to be done and in what priority. Ziaur Rahman was in favor of cutting off Chittagong with the intent of having a permanent liberated area in that region so that the provisional government could function from there. Osmany supported Zia although he preferred to have the Comilla-Sylhet region as the liberated area. Several senior commanders including Khaled Mosharraf questioned the wisdom of such a strategy. Even if an area could be liberated, what would it cost in terms of men and material? More importantly, how long could the *Mukti Bahini* hold the liberated area? The Pakistan Army would certainly try to re-take the area using every resource at its disposal. Osmany did not like being challenged by his sub-ordinates and he was given to tantrums. He would lose his temper on the slightest of provocation, and every time he had disagreements with his commanders or the government, he would threaten to resign.<sup>14, 15</sup> At one point, the commanders also felt that given the paucity of communication equipment and other resources including the lack of staff officers

<sup>13</sup> Some authors, e.g., S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2005, have referred to the *Mukti Bahini* strategy as the 'Teliapara Doctrine' because the strategy was adopted in meetings held in Teliapara. As a matter of fact, only the first meeting was held in Teliapara. Subsequently, the commanders met in Agartala as well as Calcutta. The decisions taken in these meetings are collectively known as the 'Teliapara Doctrine'.

<sup>14</sup> Osmany had used the same threat with the prime minister a couple of times when the prime minister disagreed with him. Once Tajuddin Ahmed called his bluff and advised him that if he really wanted to resign, he should give it in writing; the government would accept it. After this, Osmany never used this threat again. See Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldharā* '71, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Quazi Nooruzzaman, *A Sector Commander Remembers the Bangladesh Liberation War 1971*, Dhaka: Writer's Ink, 2010, reports that in Teliapara, Osmany had asked all senior commanders present to write in a piece of paper what they thought would be an appropriate strategy for the conduct of the war. Everyone complied. Once Osmany was given the papers, he started correcting the grammar which peeved off Major Jalil quite a bit.

at the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters, it would be best to break the Headquarters into two commands; one for the eastern region and the other for the western region<sup>16</sup>. If the government adopted this proposal then Osmany would be elevated to the cabinet as Defense Minister. Nooruzzaman took this proposal on behalf of the commanders to the prime minister. Osmany and Khaled Mosharraf were against this move and the proposal was not adopted by the cabinet. The only issue on which there was unanimous agreement was that the *Mukti Bahini* was going to launch a guerilla war against the enemy.

One morning when we were doing weapons training, we heard that Major Khaled Mosharraf had come to Motinagar early that morning to meet the students of Dacca Platoon<sup>17</sup>. He was resting and we would be called once he woke up. We all wanted to meet him since the time we joined the *Mukti Bahini*. As soon as the class broke for five minutes, the entire Dacca Platoon trooped to his thatched hut. He was sleeping in a camp cot in his trousers and the noise woke him up. The first thing he did was put on his boots and then he splashed some water on his face. There were some other officers. I recognized Major Nurul Islam (Shishu) the older brother of my friend Habibur Rahman (Sanni). He looked ill<sup>18</sup>. Major Shafayet Jamil, a tall man with a confident demeanor sported a smile when he spoke. We had heard stories from our NCO and JCO instructors of how he had skillfully extricated 4 East Bengal out of a trap in Bramanbaria, and fought a couple of battles with Pakistan Army inflicting heavy casualties on the enemy. There were three Air Force officers; Squadron Leader Sadrudin, Flight Lieutenant Sultan Mahmud and Flying Officer Quader<sup>19</sup>.

We stood in a semicircle and Khaled Mosharraf spoke. After introductions and inquiries about our families, he then laid out

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Motinagar was the location of the headquarter company of 4 East Bengal. The rifle companies were deployed in defense inside or on the borders of Bangladesh. Khaled Mosharraf only came to Motinagar once in a while. He spent most of his time with the rifle companies.

<sup>18</sup> In fact, Major Nurul Islam stated that he was not suited for fighting and was unwilling to take command of any fighting troops. He was eventually assigned to Bangladesh Forces Headquarters where he worked as a staff officer for the entire duration of the war.

<sup>19</sup> Both Sadrudin and Sultan eventually became Chief of Air Staff of the Bangladesh Air Force.

the strategy of the guerilla war in simple and lucid terms. He made it clear that we were in this for the long haul. "It may take us a couple of years to make our country free. In the process, some of us may lose our lives but the fight must go on," he said. "The initial resistance is now over. The Bengali soldiers gave a good account of themselves against overwhelming odds. We have inflicted heavy casualties on the enemy. Now, we have to organize ourselves into a guerrilla army with the new volunteers of *Mukti Bahini*."

"We are not fighting to capture land. This is our land; the Pakistanis cannot take our land to West Pakistan" said Khaled Mosharraf. And then came the main punch: "We shall make everything in this land hostile to the enemy. We will not allow him to sleep, eat, drink or even shit. If he doesn't die of a bullet he'll die of a heart attack. We must make it so bad for the enemy that he will start seeing freedom fighters behind every bush, tree, hillock, inside a hole, and even in his dreams. The harassment will have to be so intense that even the rustle of a leaf shall strike fear in their hearts! We will make the Pakistani soldier paranoid of us. And when he is down on his knees the regular elements of the *Mukti Bahini* will finish him off. If the Americans with all their money, modern weapons, and airplanes cannot defeat the Viet Cong, we will prevail over the Pakistan Army!"

In less than five minutes, he had explained the entire strategy of the war and we all understood him. If we analyze the progress of events of the liberation war, Khaled Mosharraf was on the mark. The initial resistance by the Bengali soldiers ended around the last week of April. The process of reorganizing the *Mukti Bahini* began in May through systematic recruitment and training. During the months of June and July, 30,000 new volunteers of the *Mukti Bahini* were trained and deployed for operations. The strategy described by Khaled Mosharraf went into effect in real terms from August. By October, the *Mukti Bahini* had effectively attained the goal Khaled Mosharraf had laid out. Hasan Zaheer (2001) a senior Pakistani civil servant in East Pakistan in 1971 describes the state of affairs in his book<sup>20</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> Hasan Zaheer, *The Separation of East Pakistan*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001.

*Towards the end of October 1971, the mukti bahini, armed and trained in large numbers during the last six months in India, had intensified its operations inside East Pakistan and on its borders ... their contribution to the defeat of Pakistan army was, in fact very significant. Throughout the period March-November, the highly motivated rebel insurgents kept up the pressure on the Pakistan army with reckless courage and prevented the resumption of transport, communication, trade or any kind of economic activity in the province. They wore out and demoralized the Pakistan armed forces ...*

Similar descriptions are also found in *Witness to Surrender* by Siddiq Salik (1977) of the Pakistan Army, who states<sup>21</sup>:

*As time passed, their sabotage work attained a degree of sophistication ... Their sabotage inventory included damage to, or destruction of, 231 bridges, 122 railway lines, and 90 electric installations. They could not reach this figure without a high degree of motivation ... On 11 October the rebels introduced a new element to their operations. They used mortars for the first time in Dacca ... Quite contrary to the wishful optimism of their commanders, the (Pakistani) troops were in low state of training, equipment and morale. They had been through eight long months without seeing any improvement in the situation. They had no time for training to fight a conventional war. They had not known to rest or relief for several months ... Worst of all, several of them had no heart in operations ... It is said that three quarters of command lies in knowing what is going on the minds of their troops ... When they were told that we lost 237 officers, 136 junior commissioned officers, and 3,559 other ranks in counter-insurgency operations, they preferred to count those who had survived. Little did they realize that the psychological casualties in their command were several times higher than the physical losses. As a result of this low state of morale, the troops had lost aggressiveness in patrolling and tenacity in fighting,*

Shortly after we left him a few of us, all students of Dacca University, were called back by Khaled Mosharraf. This time he asked us if we were ready for an operation in Dacca. That surprised us. We hadn't even finished a week of training and he wanted us to

<sup>21</sup> Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1977. Parenthesis in quotation added by author.



go to Dacca for an operation! Sensing our anxiety, he said "Don't worry; hopefully it won't involve any fighting." He then told us that a number of officers' families were in Dacca, sheltered in homes of relatives but they could not live in one address for long. They were in constant danger of being picked up which was affecting the morale and well-being of the *Mukti Bahini* commanders. "Before the Pakistan Army can intern them, we want them here so we won't have to worry about them. We need some volunteers to bring them". Before anyone could say anything, Shahidullah Khan Badal suggested that Kazi Bhai and I undertake the task.

Immediately, Shafayet Jamil, Nurul Islam and Khaled Mosharraf wrote a one-line message to their wives in Bengali which simply said '*chole asho*'<sup>22</sup>. Mrs. Musharraf was staying in the old part of Dacca close to Kazi Bhai's home. He was going to contact her. Mrs. Jamil was in Maghbazar and Mrs. Islam in Eskaton. I knew both houses. We were to leave early next morning. Both of us received a hundred rupees as operational money.

The following morning, immediately after sunrise Kazi Bhai and I started for Dacca. We had to reach the city before dusk and not get stuck in the curfew. We were attired like ordinary village folks<sup>23</sup>. Our cover was we were going to the city to find work since there were no work opportunities in the village. We didn't use any bus and avoided major ferry crossings. The two of us used auto rickshaws and country boats. I had decided against going to Testuri Bazar because the Pakistani Army had established a camp at the Technical School, very close to our home. We succeeded in avoiding all hostile check posts and arrived in Dacca late in the afternoon. I went to Bashir's grandfather's house in Becharam Dewri in the old part of the city. Bashir's uncle Salauddin Ahmed knew my parents.

As I knocked, Bashir's older brother, Nazir, opened the door<sup>24</sup>. He was very surprised to see me in that attire. Nazir knew that I

<sup>22</sup> 'Come' in Bengali.

<sup>23</sup> We had information that Pakistan Army checkpoints were screening for students entering Dacca.

<sup>24</sup> Nazir had earlier moved in with his uncle since the old part of the city was considered safer than their home in Eskaton.

had left Dacca to join the *Mukti Bahini* and quickly ushered me in. Once inside, I asked Salauddin Ahmed's permission if I could stay there for the night. He sensed what was going on and without asking questions gave instructions to make me feel at home. Nazir gave me a change of clothes. I wanted to see my family and I was thinking aloud with my hosts, when Salauddin Ahmed suggested that I meet my parents at my grandmother's house. He then called my father and said "I've good news and you shall see for yourself that everything is alright. Be in Khaje Dewan tomorrow at noon."

The next morning, I met Kazi Bhai at Kalta Bazar. We decided to contact the families the following day and then decide when we should start back for Motinagar. I left Kazi Bhai and headed for Khaje Dewan. I was wondering how my parents and grandmother would react when they saw me. Would they try to persuade me to give up my *Mukti Bahini* adventure or would they be supportive?

I arrived in Khaje Dewan well before the appointed time. My parents were already there. I found my father in my grandmother's room, lying on her bed. He did not look well, his lips were quivering and he was unable to speak. Then, with a loud wail he broke down in tears. He cried for several minutes as I stood in silence feeling guilty for causing him so much pain. My mother came and hugged me. She hadn't said a word and now she spoke. She told me that he had a breakdown the moment he found my note. After that he constantly worried about my safety and well-being. His biggest frustration was that he was unable to protect me, a role he played all my life. My mother, on the other hand, appeared strong. If I had not seen this scene, I would have thought that my mother would be broken down and my father the pillar of strength for the family.

My father eventually calmed down and spoke: "You have chosen a path and I am not going to try and dissuade you. It's dangerous but it is the right thing to do." And after that there was no more discussion on the subject. I told them why I was in Dacca and how long I would be in town. They did not want me to go to Testuri Bazar for the same reason I avoided it. I also did not want to spend more than one night in one place. They suggested I stay in Khaje Dewan that night. Then we all sat down for a home cooked meal. I inquired about my siblings. Only Shikha knew what I was

up to. The younger ones, Opoo and Shipra, eleven and nine respectively, were told that Dacca was not safe for young men like me, so, I was sent off to the village.

My parents stayed in Khaje Dewan for as long as they could and then left before the onset of curfew. Before leaving, my mother said that the following night I would be sleeping in my cousin, Babu Apa's house in Siddeshwari. Babu Apa was older to me by several years. Her husband, Akram Hussain was a chartered accountant and worked for the Industrial Development Corporation. They had three small children, the youngest was a toddler and the oldest was five or six. The next day, my parents arrived early in Khaje Dewan with Shikha. They had brought a small bag for me with a few personal items. My mother and Shikha would also camp out with me at Babu Apa's place for the next few days while I was in Dacca.

The next day, I first went to see Mrs. Shafayet Jamil in Moghbazar. I gave her the one line chit I brought from her husband. She scrutinized it carefully and finally said that it was Shafayet's handwriting. "So are you coming with us?" I asked. And she replied, "Yes" and then she called her two young sons, aged three and four. She had a lot of questions about the journey especially about what to carry with her, et cetera. "We travel light", I said. "Take only one extra set of clothes for yourself but not too many children's clothes, and also baby food." I told her that we'd leave in two days.

When I met Mrs. Islam, she was going through a nervous breakdown. Although she knew me, she refused to place herself and her daughters at our disposal. She even mentioned that intelligence agencies were keeping an eye on her. I did not pursue the issue further and quickly left the place. That afternoon when I met Kazi Bhai, I told him about my two encounters. He said he could not find Mrs. Khaled Mosharraf at the address we had been given. He could not ask around because he didn't want to arouse suspicion. We finally decided to leave with Mrs. Jamil and her boys.

I spent the next twenty four hours with my mother and Shikha. My father came by for lunch. My mother spent most of the time on the prayer mat wiping tears from time to time and occasionally

getting up to blow her blessings on me. There was so much pent up emotion but no one expressed anything. Our hosts had no idea what was going on. Before I left, my mother gave me five hundred rupees. Then she did something quite uncharacteristic of her. She gave me a gold ring and said, "Use it in an emergency; and sell your Swiss watch as well if you have to"<sup>25</sup>.

When it was time to go, not much was said although I could feel the emotional stress in my mother's and sister's eyes. As we said our goodbyes, there was no crying or overt display of emotion although I felt that the three of us were thinking the same thing: was this our last meeting?

I picked up Mrs. Jamil and her two sons from Moghbazar and went to the Hatkhola bus stand where Kazi Bhai joined us. We followed the same route that we had used earlier. Around dusk, we knocked on the door of the same house that had hosted us for the night a few weeks ago. They were hospitable as usual, and did not even inquire about the lady and the children; they just got busy making us comfortable. Arrangements for Mrs. Jamil and the boys were made in the *andarmahal*<sup>26</sup>. Kazi Bhai and I slept in the same room we used earlier. The next morning we set out with the younger boy on my shoulders and the older one on Kazi Bhai's. They were too young to make the remainder of the journey on foot. Mrs. Jamil wore a *burka*.

After our departure, our parents contacted each other. Alam's parents were strong. Ustad's parents had received information from Ibrahim's family that we were in Motinagar. My *Khalu*, Mr. Wajiullah (Shamol's father), and Professor Munier Chowdhury (Bhashon's father) were worried as well but they were in a better state than my father. My father met them frequently. Munier Chowdhury who was my father's contemporary from university days, consoled the other parents by saying "What our sons are doing, we couldn't do. Let's pray they succeed." They remained in contact throughout the war and gave each other strength.

<sup>25</sup> Decades later, one of my nieces recalled the incident as that was the first time in her life she saw adults cry, the adults being my mother and sister. "When they cried there was no sound only tears," she said.

<sup>26</sup> *Andarmahal* in Bengali means 'inside quarters' where males outside the family may not enter.

We reached Motinagar without incident. Shafayet Jamil was delighted to see his family. He was taking over 3 East Bengal as commanding officer and would be leaving for Raiganj in Balurghat, West Dinajpur in the next couple of days. The battalion was being reorganized. He asked Kazi Bhai and me to join 3 East Bengal. We told him we'd think about it.

In the Dacca platoon tent, I found Shamol a nervous wreck. At the 'persuasion' of some NCOs, he had participated in the execution of some Pakistani prisoners by bayoneting. The incident had devastated him. He was now mortally scared of the NCOs who had forced him into this act. Ustad too was distraught by this incident. The next morning, I tried to find out as much as I could about this matter. No one wanted to talk although everyone in Dacca Platoon knew about it. Executing a couple of Pakistani prisoners was not considered a big deal. However, one thing was clear; that we were in a league that we knew nothing about. Death was all around us, people were getting killed left, right and center. If someone wanted to blow you away, you wouldn't even know it. Shamol, Helal and I finally decided that we would leave Motinagar and go to Balurghat and join 3 East Bengal. That way we can still fight for our country and at the same time Shamol would not have to deal with those NCOs. We also decided against telling anyone our intent. It was best to go on the quiet.

Two or three days later, Ustad, Shamol and I left Motinagar. We would have to go all around Bangladesh to reach Raiganj. This was going to be an arduous journey. Agartala was not connected by rail. The nearest rail head was in Dharmanagar about seventy miles from Agartala. There were very few buses on this route and most travelled by hitching a ride in cargo carrying trucks. We reached the truck stop around nine in the morning. Trucks were leaving every couple of minutes. A 5 ton truck was about to leave. Two BSF sepoy were already on board. We negotiated a special fare by convincing the driver that as refugees we did not have much money. The driver agreed much to the annoyance of the BSF sepoy who had paid more. We had decided we would save every penny we could by having only one meal a day at least for the duration of the journey.

We had to sit on top of the cargo on the tarpaulin and tightly hold on to the ropes that held the cargo in place. Soon we were on

our way on the winding mountainous road. If we fell, we'd meet our Creator. We had no identification papers but there was no point worrying. The scenery was gorgeous. The hills were covered with lush green forests. In some places, the clouds floated below the mountain peaks. We were enjoying the scenery when dark clouds gathered in the distance. We were heading in that direction. Then it started to rain and we were completely drenched. We drove through the rain which let up after an hour. The nine hour trip took us through many tunnels and mountain passes before we finally reached Dharmanagar. It was dark and the truck dropped us in front of the rail station. There was a strong stench of faeces and urine in the air.

We checked our watches; we had about an hour before the train left. The rail station was spilling over with refugees; thousands of them. Their misery was mind-boggling; men, women and children, young and old, all were jostling for a little space in the train that was bursting at the seams. Even the roofs were packed. We did not bother to buy tickets because the guards did not check refugees. There was no space anywhere. Finally, as the train started to move we settled on the ledge of the engine. It was a local train and it stopped everywhere. The train was going to Karimganj from where we would have to take an express train to Gauhati. We were very tired and soon dozed off.

At every station, people were getting off and the crowd was getting thinner. Sometime early morning the train was at some station when it started to rain. The car behind the engine was a baggage compartment. Earlier it was filled with people and chickens but now it had emptied a bit and had room for us. We moved there. Pretty soon we found seats in a third class compartment. As soon as we were settled, someone brought out two packets of biscuits. He had lifted them off a vendor in the station just as the train had started to move! We had a big laugh as we made short work of the biscuits; we hadn't eaten anything since we left Motinagar.

As sunlight broke, we could see that the rail line ran almost parallel to a hilly river which we were told was the mighty Brahmaputra. The white water of the river, the cool mountain breeze and fairly empty compartment made this leg of the journey quite comfortable. A little later we reached Karimganj where we

ran into my friend Humayun Quader Chowdhury<sup>27</sup>. He had left Dacca a couple of days ago and was going to Malda where he had relatives. He joined our group and told us that if we went to Malda, his people could help us and look after our immediate needs.

We got on the express train to Gauhati and found a fairly empty third class compartment for ourselves. As we started talking to our fellow passengers we found that there was a lot of curiosity about Bangladesh, students of Dacca University and the *Mukti Bahini*. Then, a *puri-bhaji wallah* came and proffered each one of us a leaf platter of *puri* and *bhaji*. We were very hungry and were staring at each other when the vendor sensed our anxiety and said, "Don't worry, you don't have to pay. I've already been paid by the man there." We looked at the man and recognized the newly married Indian Hindu couple with whom we had made acquaintance earlier. The couple was a little older than us. They were excited to meet Dacca University students who were freedom fighters. We thanked them. The *puri bhaji* tasted fantastic.

We reached Gauhati around dusk. The next train to New Jalpaiguri was after midnight. Someone suggested that we bathe before we go to eat. The past thirty six hours had worn us out. We could see the Brahmaputra flowing majestically through the city and it looked tempting. As we headed for the river, we were accosted by some local boys who were about our age. They picked on us because we were Bengalis. One of them wanted to see our watches and whatever else had we had in our pockets. I knew that if we gave them anything or showed them our watches; the chances of getting them back were extremely slim. Instead we tried to win them over. We told them that we were students like them and were only passing through Gauhati; we'd leave town in a short while. In order to evoke their sympathy, we told them that our parents were killed by Pakistanis which was false. We finally managed to talk our way out without losing anything or getting into a contest of physical strength.

Everyone seemed to freshen up after a dip in the river. We were looking forward to dinner and wanted a change of fare from the largely vegetarian food of Motinagar. There was a Muslim

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<sup>27</sup> Humayun and I were class mates from Notre Dame and we both were students in the Physics Department in Dacca University.

restaurant near the radio station and we headed for it. After the meal, we entered a movie theatre beside the railway station and watched a Hindi movie. The express train left Gauhati on time and we reached New Jalpaiguri sometime early morning. Our plans had changed somewhat after Humayun joined us. We were going to go to Malda before Balurghat. So we took the Calcutta bound train from New Jalpaiguri and got off at Malda.

At Malda, Humayun could not trace any of his relatives. We searched for a couple of hours but we could not find anyone. Then someone in the group said, "Why don't we take a short trip to Calcutta and see for ourselves what is going on in the highest seats of our new country." Since an early age, we had heard stories of Calcutta. We all listened to the All India Radio, Calcutta. For those of us who grew up and spent all their life in Dacca, it was the mythical city of the Bengal Renaissance and secretly we all wanted to go. No one objected although we had no idea where to stay or how to fend for ourselves. We did not know a single person in this megalopolis and we had very little money.

Everyone was exhausted and hungry. So, we got ourselves a hotel room near the Malda district court. We had to leave the room by dusk. The hotel catered to villagers of the neighboring subdivisions who came to the courts in Malda. The place had a well and we all had a bath. We washed our clothes and hung them to dry. The room had beds for two people but the manager gave us extra bedding so that two could sleep on the floor. We hadn't slept in real beds since we left Dacca. The room had a ceiling fan and we turned it on at full speed and dozed off. After our rest, we ordered food: rice, lentils, vegetable and fish curry. Our meal over, we left the hotel and headed for the railway station. That night we slept on the platform benches. The following afternoon we boarded a train for Calcutta,

The train was packed with refugees. At every station where the train stopped, there were a lot of policemen of the Central Reserve Police (CRP) as well as the Indian Army. The CRP had their weapons chained to their web belts so that Naxals would not be able to snatch them. The Military Police (MP) were supervising the travel of military personnel. In every express train, there were several cars meant only for the military where civilians could not board. One could see that India was getting on a war footing.



We landed at Calcutta's Howrah Station<sup>28</sup> around midnight. After arrival, we found that Calcutta would be shut down in the morning because of a general strike or *bandh*. We decided to spend the night at the station and spreading some old newspapers on the floor of an upper class waiting room we fell asleep. In the morning with the *bandh* in place, the only way to get into the city was on foot. We started walking.

A couple of days earlier, the Deputy High Commissioner of Pakistan Mr. Hossain Ali, a Bengali, had defected and switched his allegiance to Bangladesh<sup>29</sup>. The Pakistan chancery at Circus Avenue in Calcutta was now an office of the Bangladesh Government<sup>30</sup>. We decided to go there first. Hours later, we reached the former Pakistani Deputy High Commissioner's office cum residence. We managed to talk our way into the compound and found ourselves in the dining room where Hossain Ali was about to sit down for lunch. He was not amused having us in his residence. He told us that he could not offer us anything but we could try our luck at 8 Theatre Road which was the seat of the provisional government.

As we headed for Theatre Road, I remembered my father's friend, Mr. Ashraf Ali Choudhury; an MNA from Joypara, Dacca, was in Calcutta. He was an income tax lawyer and a well to do man. His sons, Shamim Ashraf Choudhury<sup>31</sup> and Rasul Ashraf Choudhury (Tenzing) went to Residential Model School. Ashraf Ali Choudhury was well known for his generosity. His Dacca home in Purana Paltan had a separate building only for visitors from his village. His wife was from Calcutta.

We reached 8 Theatre Road and found the place extremely crowded and chaotic. We made some inquiries and found Ashraf Ali Choudhury's address in Taltala Lane, which was a Muslim area behind the New Market. He was staying in his in-law's home.

<sup>28</sup> One of two main rail stations of Calcutta; the other is Sealdah.

<sup>29</sup> Mr. Hossain Ali switched allegiance after prolonged negotiations with the provisional government. He was assured that he and his staff would not suffer any reduction in pay or perquisites if he proclaimed allegiance to Bangladesh. See Faruk Aziz Khan, *Spring 1971*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> The second floor of the Circus Avenue office eventually housed the Foreign Ministry of the Provisional Government while the ground floor continued to be used as Hossain Ali's residence.

<sup>31</sup> Shamim Ashraf Choudhury is a well known television cricket commentator.

Choudhury *Chacha* met us with open arms. He didn't ask any question; he was just happy to see us alive. Each one of us got a new *lungi* and a vest. "Go and bathe," he said. We were served an early dinner of rice, mutton curry and mashed potatoes. The food tasted so good that it reminded us of home. We ate till our stomachs distended. During dinner, we found out that a dozen other young men, mainly from the Purana Paltan area, were also Choudhury *Chacha's* guests at Taltala Lane. It was interesting that out of that group; only Nasiruddin Yousuf Bachchu was going to join the *Mukti Bahini*. The rest were going to remain in Calcutta and hopefully find something useful to do.

We told Choudhury *Chacha* that we would be in Calcutta for a few days and then leave for Balurghat to join 3 East Bengal. The next day, he bought a shirt and a pair of trousers for each one of us. We also got a rucksack, bed sheet and everyone got some spending money. For the next three or four days, we roamed the *Mahanagar*. We saw movies, went to the planetarium and ate from street vendors. We had a good time. Before our departure, Chowdhury *Chacha* took us to dinner at his friend's home. The hosts were cultured and we got a first hand glimpse of how the upper class in Calcutta lived. The food was fantastic and we gorged. No saying when we'd get such fare again. The following day, we thanked Choudhury *Chacha* profusely before boarding the train to Balurghat.

We finally reached the 3 East Bengal camp at Raiganj sometime in the late afternoon. Shafayet Jamil was very surprised to see us. The battalion had suffered heavy casualties while getting out of Saidpur Cantonment at the beginning of the war. They had returned from a field exercise and were sleeping in their barracks when Pakistanis, fellow soldiers actually, attacked them. Many Bengali soldiers died in their cots. Survivors trekked to Hilli through Fulbari where they finally crossed the border. When the battalion reached Indian Territory, they only had about two companies' strength. Some Bengali officers were missing<sup>32</sup>. Captain Anwar Hossain was the only officer with the battalion and he led the unit to safety.

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<sup>32</sup> Captain Ashraf Hussain and Lieutenant Mukleshur Rahman were with the battalion when it extracted itself out of Saidpur Cantonment. They went missing from Fulbari. No one knew their whereabouts.

Shafayet Jamil was extremely busy reorganizing the battalion and was very short handed. He was raising two new rifle companies. Besides Anwar, he had no other officers with him. Shafayet Jamil and Anwar were doing the recruitment and conducting the training of new soldiers. Shahed Nasrullah, a student, was working as Shafayet Jamil's staff officer<sup>33</sup>. He was a former student of Notre Dame and a friend of ours. His main task was to liaise with the Indian Army and get the unit equipped as soon as possible. Shahed did not know much about the army and a senior JCO of 3 East Bengal, Subedar Prodhan, was working with him. We offered our services to Shafayet Jamil. He appreciated the offer but stated that unless we were trained, there was very little we could do. The Bangladesh Forces Headquarters was going to recruit potential officer candidates for the *Mukti Bahini*. Shafayet Jamil encouraged us to appear for selection when the selection board came to Balurghat. He also said that 3 East Bengal would be going to Tura to be a part of Ziaur Rahman's command.

The camp in Balurghat was housed in a school. A tent city sprawled all around the buildings. Balurghat was also the Zonal Headquarter of the North West Zone<sup>34</sup>. Major Najmul Haq was the Zonal Commander. Shafayet Jamil introduced us to him. He was an artillery officer who was deputed to the EPR where he was a Wing Commander. Haq and his men revolted on the night of March 26. Najmul Haq was a man of quiet disposition and serious nature<sup>35</sup>. He too was short handed; he had only one officer, Lieutenant Idris of the EME (Electrical and Mechanical Engineering) corps, who had the reputation of being a daredevil fighter.

Balurghat also housed the biggest youth camp in the region. The affairs of the youth camp were the responsibility of the political leaders although I don't remember seeing any MNA or

<sup>33</sup> Shahed Nasrullah later went away to Paris after the battalion moved to Tura. After liberation, I met Shahed and he told me that he could not handle the stress of combat.

<sup>34</sup> Before the *Mukti Bahini* was organized in eleven sectors, the zonal commands were responsible for regional operations. These zones were precursor to the sectors. The Zonal Commands just sprang up as Bengali military and EPR units all over the country revolted.

<sup>35</sup> Major Najmul Haq was killed in a road accident on September 26, 1971 when his driver dozed off during a night trip.

MPA ever visit Balurghat. Occasionally, some youth and student leaders would visit but they seldom stayed. For all practical purposes, the camp was run by a few former officials who were based in the North Western districts. They were being assisted by some retired JCOs and NCOs who conducted the physical training and drill exercises. It didn't seem anything serious was happening in the youth camp and in general its inhabitants seemed satisfied with their disposition.

The four of us got a room in one of the school buildings. A few days later, Kaiser Haq and Tanvir Mazharul Islam (Tanna) arrived in Balurghat. They were housed with us in our room. We tried to help with whatever we could but there was not a whole lot to do. In the youth camp, we made friends with a former official of Radio Pakistan, Rajshahi. He was senior to us by a few years and had done his masters in English literature from Dacca University. The man had read quite a bit of erotic English literature which he shared with us. All of us found his company interesting and conversations with him were a delight. We helped him with his paperwork. Once we visited a small youth camp run by the former national soccer player, Zakaria Pintu, who told us how he did not receive all the supplies he signed for. Politicians and their cronies were making money from the youth camp supplies. Pintu found this very frustrating and was thinking about forming the Shahdhin Bangla Football Team with the former players of the Dacca Football League. He sought Tanna's help and Tanna seemed interested.

Two or three days before the departure of 3 East Bengal, the selection team for officers' training finally arrived headed by Major Quazi Nooruzzaman. He was accompanied by Squadron Leader S. R. Mirza. Shafayet Jamil and Najmul Haq were going to be members of the selection board as well. After interviewing candidates from Youth Camp the entire day, the five of us were called. I wasn't particularly challenged and the interview board did not find anything objectionable in my background. They seemed impressed by the fact that I had grown up in a boarding school and knew how to look after myself. We were told that the Zonal Headquarters would be notified about results in a few days.

Shafayet Jamil and Najmul Haq wanted us to stay in Balurghat and not go to Tura so that we could receive the selection results on

time. There would not be much time for preparations. The training was scheduled to start sometime in June. Najmul Haq was always on the road. Whenever we found him in Balurghat, we would ask him if he had any information about the selection results and he always responded in the negative. After a few of these inquiries, Najmul Haq told us that given the state of the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters, he would not be surprised if the intimation signal had fallen through the cracks. He advised us to go to Calcutta: "Meet Group Captain Khandakar. He'll know if you have been selected."

His advise sounded sound. Again, the day we landed in Calcutta there was a *bandh*. We walked to Taltala Lane. Choudhury *Chacha* was surprised to see us. We told him our story and he told us not to worry and went to make a few phone calls. When he returned after about 30 minutes he said that only Kaiser and I had made the list. The two of us would have to go to Theatre Road the next morning.

The scene in Taltala Lane had changed quite a bit. More young men from Dacca and Joypara had taken refugee at Taltala. Choudhury *Chacha's* in-laws' home could not accommodate so many people. Consequently, he rented another house in Taltala Lane for these young men. Shamol, Helal and Humayun would join them. Many years later I asked Tenzing how did his father afford all this? Was he able to take a lot of money when he went to India? Tenzing replied that the family had to leave in a hurry and his father was not able to take any money to India. His father was however able to anticipate that he may have leave in a hurry. He asked one of his clients who had business contacts in Calcutta if he could help. *Chacha's* friend wrote a small note to one of his business associates in Calcutta to give *Chacha* whatever he needed and that's where the money came from. After liberation, *Chacha* repaid every penny of that debt. The debt repayment only ended a couple of months before his death in the mid seventies.

The next morning, when Kaiser and I arrived at Theatre Road the place looked different from what we had seen earlier. Security was beefed up considerably and entry was restricted. The BSF guards would not let us enter and we were wondering what to do when Sheikh Kamal appeared. He was just as surprised to see us as

we were to see him. Hugs and backslappings over we told him why we were there. Kamal grinned and told us that he too had been selected. Another round of congratulations followed. Kamal told us to wait and went in; he had free access. When he came back, he said he could collect our papers the following day. We would have to go for a medical check up. We gave him the phone number and address of our Taltala Lane shelter. Kamal then gave us a hundred rupees for movie and dinner.

The following morning Kamal called and asked us to meet him at Theatre Road. When we arrived there we met Alik Kumar Gupta who had also been selected. We received our movement orders. The next day we would have to go to Kalyani for our medical check up. The Indian Army would provide transportation. The next day we reported on time at the army's Movement Control Office (MCO) in Sealdah where we boarded a one-ton army truck and headed for Kalyani with an Indian JCO accompanying us. In Kalyani, we reported to Captain Wahab who treated us to lunch; rice and chicken curry. Wahab was an EME officer and was now fighting as an infantryman. After lunch we were sent to an Indian army medical unit. They measured our height, took our weight, put the stethoscope in front and back while we coughed. In the end all of us were given a clean bill of health.

We left for the training camp the following day. We still didn't know where the camp was and we thought that we were going to Dehradun, or at least something like Dehradun. When we reported to the MCO, we got first class railway passes for the express train to Shiliguri and not Delhi<sup>36</sup>. We boarded a car earmarked for the military. Elsewhere on the train, refugees jammed the cars and packed the roofs while we were traveling comfortably. After dusk, dinner arrived from the buffet car in stainless steel trays; rice, chicken curry, lentils, vegetables, papadums, et cetera, far better fare than what we ever had in any *Mukti Bahini* camp. We still didn't know what our final destination was. After reaching Shiliguri, we reported to the MCO and showed our movement orders. We were given another set of rail passes to Chalsa. The train would be leaving in about an hour. Again, we were told to report to

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<sup>36</sup> Military cadets were entitled to travel in first class.

the Station Master in Chalsa who would give us passes for our final destination. When we reported to the Station Master he told us to take the next local train which was due shortly and go to New Mall. He gave us a phone number and instructed us to call that number once we arrived. The ride to New Mall was short. As the train approached the station we could see a group of young men in the platform who looked like Bangladeshis. As the train got closer we could recognize some of the faces. I was pleasantly surprised to find Mizan and Munib, the twins who joined Residential Model School from Fauzdarhat Cadet College in class eleven when I transferred to Notre Dame. I recognized Wakar, Shahriar, Didar, Matin, Manzur, Sayeed, and Samad, all students of Dacca University who were just as happy to see us. There was a lot of friendly banter, hugs and backslapping. There were of course others who we did not know.

We were going to call the phone number that the Station Master in Chalsa gave us and were told that the group that had arrived earlier had already made the call. Ten minutes later, a couple of Indian Army three-ton trucks arrived. An Indian JCO in PT kit (half sleeved shirt and shorts, all white), asked us to fall in. We could see officers attired similarly waiting at the bottom of the hill near the trucks. The JCO marched us to the waiting vehicles. The trucks groaned and droned on the winding hilly road through tea gardens. We still did not know where this mysterious military academy was.

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## Murtee

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Our convoy of three trucks drove slowly on narrow hilly roads through forests and tea gardens. After about an hour we entered a large military camp that was fenced with barbed wire. Indian army sentries guarded the entrance. We could hear sounds of firing and explosions. Outside, hundreds of *Mukti Bahini* volunteers dressed in shorts, vests and canvas shoes/jungle boots were undergoing training. The Indian Army instructors were all also dressed in PT kit. All the structures were temporary; made of bamboo thatch. The camp was on a plateau. One side of the plateau dropped to a valley carved out by a hilly whitewater stream called 'Murtee Nullah'. In some places, the fall was quite steep and exceeded a hundred feet. These were natural firing ranges and that's what they were being used for. The place was surrounded by tea gardens with no civilian habitations nearby. There were two wings; the basic training wing and the officers training wing. The basic training wing was also called the Bhashani Wing<sup>1</sup>. At any given time, a thousand to fifteen hundred recruits received training here. The volunteers were mostly from the Rangpur and Dinajpur area. After training, they joined Sector Six. Every week, several hundred would arrive and hundreds would leave after completing their four-week training. This was one of the largest training camps for the *Mukti Bahini*. At one end of the camp, there was a large open field which was our parade ground. It also served as an emergency air strip occasionally used by DC-3s (Dakotas). On one side of the parade ground were the quarter guard, armory,

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<sup>1</sup> Named after the octogenarian leader of the National Awami Party.



officers' mess and offices. We were in the Himalayan foothills with the high mountain ranges in the north. On a clear day, one could even see the snow capped peaks.

Murtee Camp was also the home of Echo Sector Headquarters of the Indian Army<sup>2</sup>. Brigadier Joshi, a burly man with a handlebar moustache, was Commander Echo Sector and also our ex-officio Commandant. The trucks drove through the basic wing and halted at the other end of the camp; the officers training wing. This part of the camp was physically separated from the basic wing by the layout of barracks. There were only four barracks; two were cadet quarters, one was the cookhouse and mess hall, and a detached barrack was the living quarters of NCO instructors and the quartermaster's store.

From my friends who had joined the Pakistan Military Academy, I had heard stories of how new cadets were subjected to hazing by senior cadets from the moment they arrived. Fortunately, we were the only course with no seniors to 'straighten us out'. We were the last batch to arrive. A total of sixty cadets were selected from all over Bangladesh. Majority were university and college students although a few had finished their education and were working before the crackdown of March 25/26. The largest group was from Dacca city. Chittagong, Sylhet and Barisal also had large contingents. Some, especially the cadets from Chittagong, namely, Fazlur Rahman, Shawkat Aly, Waliul Islam, Hashmi Mostafa Kamal and Masudur Rahman had seen combat with 8 East Bengal and EPR in the early days of the resistance. Similarly, Nazrul Islam, Shamsul Haq Bachchu, Sadeq Hossain, Salim Hasan and Anis Hasan also saw action with 2 East Bengal in either Narsinghdi or Bhairab or in the tea gardens of Sylhet. Salim and Anis were brothers<sup>3</sup>; the other pair of siblings was Mizan and Munib whom I mentioned earlier. Three former professors were in our group: Shamshul Alam was a lecturer of geography in

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<sup>2</sup> To provide operational and logistical support to the *Mukti Bahini*, the Indian Army set up a separate brigade headquarter for each *Mukti Bahini* Sector. Echo Sector was tasked to support Sector Six.

<sup>3</sup> The older brother, Salim, was a student of Engineering University. He joined 2 East Bengal after commission and was martyred in Mirpur in February 1972. His brother, Anis was a student of Dacca Medical College. He left the army after liberation to become a physician. He is a prominent researcher of war crimes and is popularly known as Dr. Hasan to the people of Bangladesh.

Rajshahi University; and Rafiqul Islam and S. A. M. Khaled were chemistry professors in private colleges in Rajshahi and Chittagong respectively. I was surprised to see Syed Kamaluddin a.k.a. Phiru Bhai, senior to me by a couple of years in Dacca University. He was a prominent student leader who kept Chhatra League in the map when the NSF<sup>4</sup> under Monem Khan's patronage was running riot in Dacca University. Prominent Chhatra League leaders did not join the *Mukti Bahini*; they preferred to be in the relative comfort of major cities like Calcutta or Agartala, far away from the battlefield. However, we did have one or two, such as M. M. K. Z. Jalalabadi and Zahirul Haq Khan who were active Chhatra Leaguers in their respective colleges. Two, namely, Ashfaqus Samad and Mohammad Ahsanullah, were members of the Chhatra Union. Most of the cadets were non-partisan as far as student politics was concerned although many had participated in the anti-Ayub student movements of 1969-70. We had three former enlisted men; Awal Chowdhury and Mohammad Mustafa were clerks in the EPR and East Bengal Regiment respectively and Aminul Islam was a JCO in the education corps. Fazle Hussain and Anisur Rahman were cadets in the Pakistan Air Force Academy and the Military Academy but had left before the army crackdown for some reason or the other. Khandakar Nurunabi, a former goalkeeper of the Pakistan national team and a star player of the Dacca Football League was also with us. Overall, it was an eclectic group.

After we got down, we were made to fall in with the others who had arrived earlier. We were introduced to our instructors by our Wing Commander Major Aswan Thapa, a Gurkha officer from the Garwal Regiment. The sixty cadets were split into four squads with fifteen in each squad. I was assigned to Squad Three and our Squad Commander was a Sikh officer from air defense artillery, Captain Sarjan Singh. Kaiser Haq, Sheikh Kamal, and Sayeed Ahmed, all students of Dacca University, were in my squad. Most of the cadets from Dacca were in Squad One and their Squad Commander was a Bengali officer from the Madras Regiment,

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<sup>4</sup> NSF stands for National Student's Front, the student wing of the Pro-Ayub Muslim League who terrorized students in Dacca University for extracting support for the Ayub regime.

Captain Debabrata Sthanapati. Thapa laid down the rules. A big part of our training was to make leaders out of us. With that consideration, a wing leader and squad leaders for each squad were appointed from the cadets for a period of two weeks. Every two weeks, a new set of appointees took over. Almost everyone got an opportunity to be a squad or wing leader. It always amused me when someone after being appointed a wing or squad leader would undergo a temporary personality change. Security was a matter of concern and we were told to report anything that appeared unusual. We were advised not to leave the camp without permission. That afternoon, a road-walk-run was scheduled which was supposed to be a recreational activity. Thapa suggested we all join. Following this initial briefing, we all lined up in front of the NCOs' barrack for our kit. Each received two blankets, a tin plate and a mug, two pairs of shorts and shirts, a pair of jungle boots and some underwear. A few weeks later, they gave each of us two pairs of khaki dungarees.

We could forget Dehradun or its relatives. Our barracks, were empty; no cots, no furniture whatsoever. We were to sleep on the floor although we got bamboo cots a couple of days later. The facilities were Spartan to say the least. The mess hall had a couple of wooden tables and benches, and we had to line up for food which was the standard *Mukti Bahini* fare. There was no electricity or plumbing. We used kerosene lamps and deep trench latrines. The bathing facilities were simply water stored in forty gallon drums although most preferred a dip in the Murtee Nullah. Nobody complained about the physical discomforts though. With hindsight, I think the conditions were perfect for training a *Mukti Bahini* officer who would have to deal with shortages all around and yet continue fighting. The only way to carry on this struggle was to remain tenacious and have the flexibility of mind to improvise.

That afternoon, we went out for the 'road-walk-run' which in effect was only run and no walk. We ran for about an hour and everyone was gasping for breath. Many had difficulty keeping up. On the other hand, the Indian officers running with us did not seem to have any difficulty. We were not in shape. Our training began in earnest the following day. The morning started early at 6:30 with physical exercises followed by breakfast. We had to run

whenever we were in any kind of drill formation. After breakfast, we ran to the armory to collect weapons that we had to deposit back before lunch. Every day, we ended up running 7-8 miles just to go to the parade ground or the armory. This was not a part of the training but it certainly helped in getting us in shape. After the first day, every muscle and joint in our body were aching; we hurt in places we did not know existed. We had a brief rest period after lunch which was followed by sports and games in the afternoon. One could play soccer, basketball, volleyball or go for a jog. Initially, night training was scheduled for one night a week and after the second week, the frequency increased. For the first few weeks, training was geared towards toughening us mentally and physically through physical training (PT), weapons training, field craft, and map reading exercises. There were no classrooms; instead, we sat on stone bleachers under trees and listened to lectures or did weapons training. If it rained, and it rained a lot, we would simply move to the verandah of our barracks. Training on tactics and field engineering started after the first week. The curriculum was such so that we got maximum hands on training. Want to blow up a bridge? Here is a mock up, set your charges and blow it up. We used live explosives.

In Bangladesh, still 'East Pakistan' to the Pakistanis, Tikka Khan relinquished his duties as the GOC-in-C Eastern Command. He was now the full time Governor, albeit, a military governor. The new Pakistani Commander, Lieutenant General Niazi, was a pompous and garrulous man who fancifully called himself 'Tiger'. With the help of collaborators he raised a para-military force, *Razakars*, which augmented his regular troops. Most of the *Razakars* were selected by members of the 'Peace Committees' which were military sanctioned civilian bodies made up of collaborators whose main task was to snitch on neighbors and give information to the occupation army<sup>5</sup>. Niazi was convinced that the main *Mukti Bahini* objective was to capture a chunk of territory that could be termed as 'liberated area'. He was hell bent in denying the *Mukti Bahini* any liberated areas. He boastfully declared that not a single inch of East Pakistan territory would be conceded. Accordingly, he

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<sup>5</sup> In reality, the peace committees fed motivated information to settle personal disputes by labeling their adversaries as *Mukti Bahini* sympathizers.

deployed his troops all along the border with the aim of preventing infiltrations and incursions. He called his defensive strategy the 'closed fist fortresses'. He declared: "My troops in the border outposts are like the extended fingers of the open hand. They will fight there as long as possible before they fold back to the fortresses to form a fist to bash the enemy's head"<sup>6</sup>. In reality, this deployment helped *Mukti Bahini* operations. The Pakistanis did not have sufficient regular troops to repulse serious incursions and there were large gaps in their line which made infiltration by *Mukti Bahini* guerrillas relatively easy. The only way Niazi could cover such a large territory was to mix his regulars with para-military forces like *Razakars* thereby depleting the fighting effectiveness of his regular units. He had no reserves to deal with contingencies. He allowed his troops to loot. Systematic rape was a part of Niazi's strategy. He would often joke with his men about their score from the previous night<sup>7</sup>. Niazi's view was that mass rape would change the ethnic composition of the province and eventually people from the eastern province would become like West Pakistanis<sup>8</sup>.

Yahya's desire to solve Pakistan's political problem with military means was not yielding the desired results. By June, the world was adequately informed about Pakistan Army's genocide, mass rapes and other crimes against humanity. Popular public opinion all over the world was against the Yahya regime. On June 24, the British suspended all aid to Pakistan and on July 15 the Foreign Relations Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives voted to suspend all economic and military assistance to Pakistan although the Nixon Administration remained loyal to the Yahya regime.

In the second week of July, the senior *Mukti Bahini* Commanders, including Osmany, met for several days in Theatre Road. The Prime Minister presided<sup>9</sup>. During discussions, it became apparent that there was considerable gap between the field

<sup>6</sup> Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1977. Niazi forgot that a fist cannot be closed if one or more fingers are broken.

<sup>7</sup> Brigadier A. R. Siddiqui, *East Pakistan the Endgame*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid and Khadim Hussain Raja, *A Stranger in My Own Country – East Pakistan, 1969-1971*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

commanders and the commander-in-chief and political leaders. The losses in terms of men and material during the resistance phase were yet to be replenished. In some cases, units did not even get sufficient ammunition making it extremely difficult for them to conduct operations. Yet, the general expectation from the *Mukti Bahini* was to achieve miracles although miracles seldom happen. On the other hand, the field commanders were getting frustrated with the lack of progress in the political arena. India had not yet recognized the Provisional Government of Bangladesh and the gap between expectations and reality created misunderstandings with the Indians. The Bangladesh liberation war was no longer a matter between Pakistan, Bangladesh and India. It was an international affair and two permanent members of the Security Council, namely, USA and China, were openly in favor of Pakistan. These countries were putting tremendous pressure on India to stop its assistance to the Provisional Government of Bangladesh and the *Mukti Bahini*<sup>10</sup>. The Nixon Administration was trying its best to portray the situation in Bangladesh as an Indian conspiracy to dismember Pakistan. According to them, the only way to bring this conflict to an end was through an UN-mandated cease fire followed by negotiations between the Awami League and Pakistani military junta. If the Bangladesh issue were to be decided by the UN, the people of Bangladesh could kiss their aspirations of independence goodbye.

The discussion on operational matters was inconclusive. The Bangladesh Forces Headquarters did not have adequate resources or personnel to provide any meaningful higher direction of war. Osmany's personality or experience was not commensurate with the qualities required of a commander of a guerilla army. During the Second World War he was in the ASC<sup>11</sup>. Subsequently, he transferred to the East Bengal Regiment where he was the commanding officer of a battalion for sometime but that experience was in the initial days of the raising of the East Bengal Regiment. He had no experience of commanding troops in battle.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. In a meeting with P. N. Haksar, Colonel Osmany told him that Indian forces had let Bangladesh down by not moving into Bangladesh immediately after the crackdown. In response, Haksar replied that if that was the expectation, it was a wrong expectation.

<sup>11</sup> Army Services Corps.

After he became a colonel, he had a desk job of a military bureaucrat in the operations directorate where he was never consulted on anything that was either operational or important. These deficiencies were now showing. A review of the top secret operational plan issued by the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters in September (Annexure A) shows that the plan provided very little guideline or additional resources to the field commanders for success in the battlefield. This document, while acknowledging the complete absence of contact between the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters and the forces in the field, sheds no light on how the situation could be alleviated. To a discerning guerilla commander, such operational plans were academic documents at best with little practical value.

At the same time, Osmany was not an inspirational commander. He seldom visited frontline troops and when he did, there was overwhelming concern about his personal safety. Many of his decisions were inconsistent. On the one hand, he was enthusiastic about raising three conventional infantry brigades, namely 'Z Force', 'K Force' and 'S Force' while his stated policy was to wage a guerilla war. He did not allocate additional resources to enhance the capabilities of the newly trained guerilla fighters or make their training more rigorous or equip them with better weaponry. Instead, he allowed the sectors to be milked of its best soldiers for the brigades and after the raising of brigades; he was advocating sending brigade troops for guerilla operations in platoon sized groups. He would often lose his cool with Sector Commanders if they brought their problems to him. The Sector Commanders found it more effective to discuss important operational issues with the Prime Minister and the Chief of Staff, Group Captain A. K. Khandakar. Theatre Road insiders say that Osmany spent most of his time writing the Bangladesh Army Act and the 'Customs of Service' for the new army<sup>12</sup>.

The Sector Commanders' meeting of July however, delineated new sector boundaries dividing Bangladesh into ten land sectors and one special operations sector (Sector 10) for Naval and air operations. Even in the delineation of sectors, one could see

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<sup>12</sup> Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986 and Faruk Aziz Khan, *Spring 1971*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1993.

Osmany's idiosyncrasies; three sectors, namely Sector 3, Sector 4 and Sector 5, and two brigades; 'Z Force' and 'S' Force, were deployed for the liberation of Sylhet, Osmany's home district<sup>13</sup>. Why Sylhet should receive such a high operational priority was not clear to most in the *Mukti Bahini*.

Members of the *Mukti Bahini* were categorized in two groups, namely *Gono Bahini* and *Mukti Fouj* depending on whether one was a guerilla or regular. The allowances for the two categories were different with the *Mukti Fouj* receiving a higher allowance than the *Gono Bahini*. This created some heartburn among the fighters in the field. In the field, all fighters were simply known as *Mukti Bahini*. Both categories of fighters often participated in the same operation and yet one group was getting a lower allowance. Such discriminatory policies did not help morale.

Starting in June, the first batch of guerillas was inducted inside the country after the completion of their four-week training. Clearly, a guerilla fighter cannot be trained in four weeks but given the pressing need, this was all that was feasible. The guerillas inducted inside had no communication equipment and there was no mechanism to coordinate the efforts of various groups. Once inside, the guerillas were pretty much on their own; they could not be replenished. They had to select their operational target, plan and execute their operation and extricate themselves from danger. This was a tall order for the newly trained guerillas. Some guerillas had difficulty in putting their training and weapons to use but many were successful in harassing the enemy. The guerillas mostly conducted their operations at night and small Pakistan Army groups who ventured out at night did so at their own risk. Many were ambushed and killed. Brigadier A. R. Siddiqi of the Pakistan Army, after a visit to East Pakistan in June, states that the *Mukti Bahini* was living up to its three-fold legend<sup>14</sup>:

*The day belongs to the army and the night to us.*

*The sunshine belongs to army and the rain to us.*

*The cities belong to army and the countryside to us.*

<sup>13</sup> Sector 3 and 'S' Force only covered the Habiganj sub-division of Sylhet.

<sup>14</sup> Brigadier A. R. Siddiqi, *East Pakistan the Endgame*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004.



Dacca Platoon guerillas infiltrated the capital in June. In mid June, they exploded a bomb in Hotel Intercontinental where the World Bank Aid Mission and Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees were staying. Both delegations were earlier assured by the Pakistan Government that all reports of unrest and liberation war were exaggerated and Dacca was normal. The Pakistan Government assured complete security to these delegations so that they could see the situation on the ground for themselves. The delegations left in a hurry and Pakistan did not get the loans and other assistance it anticipated; guerillas of the Dacca Platoon foiled it. Dacca was no longer immune from *Mukti Bahini* action. Isolated Pakistan Army posts especially those in static deployment were attacked in Farm Gate, New Market and other locations in Dacca. Even their patrols on wheels were not spared. In one such operation; my friends, Shafi Imam (Rumi), Alam and Harris attacked a Pakistan army jeep in the streets of Dacca and killed all its occupants. Sydney Schanberg of the *New York Times* after a visit to Bangladesh reported the following on July 14, 1971.

*Thousands of young Bengalis are being trained in demolition and guerrilla tactics ... The first elements of the new guerillas are beginning to flow back into East Pakistan. More and more roads and railway bridges are blown up and electrical power supplies knocked out. Some of the demolition work has been expert. Road mines are becoming common. Outside Comilla, not long ago, the guerillas blew up a railway bridge. A repair train was sent out with army guards. The guerillas attacked the repair train in broad daylight killing the fireman and taking hostages. The train sped back into town.*

Prime Minister, Tajuddin Ahmed was having an extremely difficult time since the Awami Leaguers were not united in their support for the provisional government<sup>15</sup>. His biggest foe was Sheikh Fazlul Haque Moni and his cronies. Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed, who was unable to become prime minister, sided with Moni and added to Tajuddin's troubles. Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury and Professor Yousuf Ali, both senior leaders of the party, also joined the anti-Tajuddin bandwagon. Mizan demanded

<sup>15</sup> Faruk Aziz Khan, *Spring 1971*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1993 and Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

Tajuddin's removal from the post of prime minister<sup>16</sup>. He openly stated in a meeting that given the depressing progress of the liberation war, it would be better to go back home and compromise with the Pakistanis. These leaders neither strengthened the hand of the provisional government nor did they realize that the situation on the ground had changed considerably since March 25/26. We were at war, which was markedly different from a popular uprising. Recruiting, training and arming fresh volunteers of a guerilla army and then deploying them for war with no prior preparation was a whole lot more complicated than putting together a procession, demonstration or rally. This was not the time for petty party politics or disunity. The people of Bangladesh expected unity and total support for the provisional government from their political leaders. The youth leaders and their cohorts, however, did not see it this way. For every disagreement with Tajuddin, they sought Indian intervention thus weakening Tajuddin's hand although his relationship with the Indian Prime Minister and her Principal Secretary, P. N. Haksar was excellent throughout 1971. The dissension between Tajuddin and Moni reached such a level that Moni even sent an assassin to kill Tajuddin<sup>17</sup>. The assassin got past the security and could have killed the Prime Minister. Instead, he had a change of heart and surrendered to Tajuddin when he saw the Prime Minister working in his desk late at night. It is not clear why the prime minister did not initiate any action against Moni. He probably did not want to add to the disunity that was already very difficult.

In order to streamline the administration in the field, the provisional government created nine Administrative Zones in the last week of July (Annexure B). Each Zone was to be governed by a Zonal Administrative Council composed of elected representatives. The purpose of these councils was to set up appropriate political-administrative machinery in the liberated areas and to extend the writ of the Bangladesh Government all over the country as more territories became liberated. These councils were tasked to ensure that the policies of the provisional

<sup>16</sup> Mizanur Rahman Chowdhury left the Awami League in the mid-eighties and joined Jatiya Party to become the prime minister in dictator Ershad's government.

<sup>17</sup> Faruk Aziz Khan, *Spring 1971*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1993.

government were followed and correctly implemented in the field. At the same time, these councils could have ensured that public representatives remained close to the people within a democratic framework. In reality, the Zonal Administrative Councils never really took off. Like everything else during the liberation war, paucity of resources was a major problem. No Zonal Administrative Council ever got the resources that were envisaged but neither did the *Mukti Bahini* get what they needed and yet they did not stop fighting. The elected representatives never took this task seriously. Most did not demonstrate the resolve and determination that was necessary. The majority preferred to stay in big cities like Calcutta and Agartala. However, there were notable exceptions. These weaknesses would have serious consequences after victory.

The Awami League held a party council in Shiliguri on July 3. Tajuddin went to the council with some trepidation although he was thoroughly prepared. He laid out to the Awami Leaguers what was at stake and what needed to be done. He stated that if he was not the right person to lead the provisional government, he would have no problem stepping aside but the task should go to someone who could finish the job and ensure victory in the end. If the present leaders were inept, natural forces would bring in new leadership. Conducting the liberation war on a shoe string budget and limited resources was not an easy task. To the credit of Awami League, most of the elected representatives understood the situation and were not swayed by the youth leaders. The council reaffirmed its confidence in Tajuddin and the Prime Minister came out of the council meeting with a strong mandate.

By now, the youth leaders had formed the *Mujib Bahini* without the authorization of the provisional government. This force was trained by RAW, and was better equipped than the *Mukti Bahini*. They were neither under the control of the provisional government, nor were they deployed for operations. Uban (1985) describes how the *Mujib Bahini* was formed. The youth leaders were concerned and upset when they saw Moulana Bhashani with Indian intelligence officers in a luxury hotel. They termed this incident as 'Naxalites' infiltrating the *Mukti Bahini* although Bhashani and the NAP were not Naxalites. Terming Bhashani and

the NAP as Naxalites was the excuse used for getting the informal sanction from RAW to raise the force. Why RAW agreed with the youth leaders when they were fully aware of Bhashani's political credentials and antecedents can only be conjectured. The inclusion of Syed Ashraf Islam, the Acting President's eldest son, and Sheikh Jamal in this force effectively softened the stance of the provisional government although Tajuddin saw the *Mujib Bahini* as a source of disunity. Eventually, it took Aurora's intervention to delineate the operational areas for the *Mukti Bahini* and *Mujib Bahini*; *Mukti Bahini* would be responsible for operations in areas within twenty miles of the border and *Mujib Bahini* would operate in the interior. The sleeper cells of *Mujib Bahini* inside the country were never activated during the liberation war and they did not undertake a single operation against the Pakistanis<sup>18</sup>.

Majority of the members of this force were members of Chhatra League. There were incidents where *Mujib Bahini* members encouraged, coaxed and even intimidated *Mukti Bahini* troops to desert their units with weapons and join the *Mujib Bahini*. This created huge problems for *Mukti Bahini* commanders. Tajuddin wanted to bring the *Mujib Bahini* under the control of the provisional government and deploy them under the *Mukti Bahini* command. He raised the issue with Mrs. Gandhi on more than one occasion<sup>19</sup>. Mrs. Gandhi agreed in principle and even issued instructions to this effect. However, RAW was against this move. Their principal argument was that the provisional government was weak and there was considerable disunity amongst Awami Leaguers. What would happen if the provisional government failed? More importantly, with Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in custody in Pakistan, there were unanswered questions as to how the Bangladesh situation would eventually play out. So, RAW convinced Mrs. Gandhi to postpone this move.

<sup>18</sup> Major General S.S. Uban, *Phantoms of Chittagong Hill Tracts*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1985. As the chief patron of the *Mujib Bahini*, he casts this force in the best possible light. Yet, he is unable to mention a single operation undertaken by this force. Details of all operations mentioned in his book are the ones undertaken by the Tibetan Guerillas.

<sup>19</sup> J. N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999 and Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldharā '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

Coming back to Murtee, we fired .303 rifles in the first week of training. It was a difficult weapon to aim accurately because of its recoil. After firing, we ran to see our targets followed by a contingent of NCO and officer instructors. If you fired badly, you came back doing front roll all the way. In each batch, a couple would come back front rolling. Some failed again and again and the same routine followed. That's how bad we were at the beginning. Havildar Major Balbir Singh recorded our results. He had a stern exterior but was a soft man inside. After repeated attempts, if a cadet did not show any improvement, Balbir Singh would come to his rescue. Before the officers reached he'd puncture the paper target with his pencil even if we failed to score a single hit!

"Couldn't even hit one *Ustad*..."

"No, no, Qayyum *Sahib*, you've got a grouping!"

And there would be five new holes in the target.

The next week, we fired at night which presented quite a few challenges. How do you see the target at night or for that matter the sights of your weapon when it is pitch dark? Our friend, Abul Hossain, was quick to improvise. He caught two fireflies and mashed the insects on the sights of his rifle. Others did the same, and those who did had better results. Our instructors were impressed and amused by Abul's technique.

After the second week, the intensity of the training increased and lessons in tactics began. We were not issued with any training manuals; we simply listened to lectures and took notes. For each subject, we witnessed demonstrations that were impressive. They not only showed us how a particular operation was to be conducted but also highlighted how to improvise and make up for deficiencies in material and resources. As soon as we learnt a new subject, we would practise the lesson through exercises. The emphasis was always on night operations. Consequently, we would go out for night exercises several times a week. After every night exercise, when we returned to our barracks after cleaning and depositing our weapons, we would have to physically examine each other using kerosene lamps or flash lights to rid ourselves of the leeches that sucked on our blood through the

night. We called it the 'leech parade'. Murtee was infested with leeches; the hot damp weather was ideal for them and they thrived. They not only crept up from the ground, they also dropped from trees especially if it was raining. Pulling out leeches would invariably result in wounds that took a long time to heal. Soon, we learnt how to deal with leeches; we used salt or lighted cigarettes to dislodge them.

We started to practice the assault course from the third week where we would have to negotiate various obstacles in battle gear with rifles. Once the Burma bridge ropes gave way and several people fell and got hurt; nothing serious though. The toughest physical obstacle was the vertical rope where one had to climb about thirty feet in the air using a single rope. Initially, people had difficulty with this obstacle but with time everyone mastered the proper technique and the vertical rope was not so demanding. The obstacle that everyone loathed was '007', a zigzag tunnel made from cut-up forty gallon oil drums that was always half filled with a gooey muck where frogs and small snakes inhabited. One always dreaded to be the first to go into '007'. We also received lessons in unarmed combat. We practised all kinds of throws, hand to hand fighting techniques, sentry silencing methods, et cetera on a circular pit filled with sawdust. We were taught about the most vulnerable points of the human body and how to neutralize the enemy with a single blow.

The training made everyone physically and mentally strong but the poor diet made us susceptible to infections that took a long time to heal. Most were suffering from some kind of stomach ailment. We needed more nutrition but could not get it because we did not have any money to buy extra food from the canteen. After we received our first cadet's allowance of thirty rupees, we formed little food clubs<sup>20</sup>. A group of 4-5 cadets would pool their money to buy stuff like Amul cheese, Cadbury chocolates, Horlicks, canned sardines, cashew nuts, biscuits and the like. My food club had Sheikh Kamal, Kaiser Haq, Nurunnabi, and Mizanur Rahman<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> A few days after we received our first monthly allowance, we were told that our monthly allowance was actually a hundred rupees and we received the additional money the following day.

<sup>21</sup> He was senior to most of us by several years so we called him *Chacha* Mizan.

Kamal was the 'quartermaster' and our food club was generally well provisioned; I suspect Kamal made up the difference when his purchases exceeded our collective contributions.

The officer instructors who trained us were friendly and if we did not have any night training, they would come by our barracks in the evening to socialize. In the process, we became close to them; most notably with Captains Sthanapati and R. P. Singh. We would chat on every topic in the world although girlfriends back home always seemed to get everyone's attention. When we were boarding the train to come to Murtee, Kaiser and I picked a couple of paperbacks from the book vendors at Sealdah. One was Che Guevara's 'Guerilla Warfare' which many cadets took turns reading<sup>22</sup>. One of our favorite topics of discussion in the evening was how to incorporate Guevara's ideas into the *Mukti Bahini* tactics and operations. These discussions were enlightening and contributed to our understanding of tactics and war in general. Most times, however, the discussions were on the light side, and occasionally there would be little contests of wit between the instructors and us. Once Captain Chandan challenged Phiru to an arm wrestling contest after hearing about his reputation in the university; Phiru won. Occasionally, we would sing together mostly Hindi and Bengali film songs; Mansurul Amin, Kamal, and Samad had large repertoires and they could sing reasonably well. My squad commander, Captain Sarjan Singh, sometimes sang ghazals.

A former student leader from the anti-Ayub student movement of 1969, and now a MNA from Nilphamari, Abdur Rouf, was our 'motivation officer' although I never quite figured out what his real job was. Every couple of weeks he would come to Murtee and spend a night with us. Through Rouf, we would send letters to friends and relatives in India or other parts of the world except Bangladesh. I would write to my cousin Kajal in London, who would in turn communicate with my parents. Rouf also did our shopping; things we could not find in the canteen, we paid him and he got it for us.

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<sup>22</sup> The other books were Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Erich Segal's *Love Story*. These were the only books in Murtee. Che Guevara's *Guerilla Warfare* was the most widely read book followed by *Love Story*. Only Kaiser finished *Doctor Zhivago*.

Every time we went out on exercise, we had to cross the Murtee Nullah. On most days, especially if it rained, it was not possible for one individual to cross this hilly stream alone. The current could easily knock you over. So, we formed human chains to cross this obstacle. Once, Anisur Rahman fell and lost his compass. Losing a weapon or a piece of equipment is a big offense in the army and this loss became a source of great grief for us. We were sent to search for it when we were getting ready for lunch. For the next couple of days, we toiled during daylight hours after our training which meant that we had to forego our rest and games. Finding a small object in a hilly whitewater stream is not easy and everyone was annoyed with Anis. Finally on the third day, a JCO found the compass under a boulder some hundred and fifty meters from where Anis had lost it. On another occasion, Munib lost his rifle in a similar situation and we had to go through the same routine again. This time, the search lasted almost a week. The trainees from the basic wing also joined in. We cursed Munib the entire time. Eventually, the rifle was found by a trainee of the basic wing.

In spite of the hardship, Murtee was a good experience. We took our training seriously and the quality of the training was first-rate<sup>23</sup>. During breaks in training, we did what young men do best: we pulled each other's legs. Cadet college and other boarding school boys were better humored about personal insults. One of our fellow cadets was Awal Chowdhury, a former Havildar clerk in EPR who took his officer status seriously. An older man, he was well equipped with a hold-all, mosquito net and even a *bodna*. We had nothing and all of us suffered from the mosquito menace. We would joke with Awal; lend us your mosquito net so that everyone can sleep under it for at least one night. Awal would have none of it until one night while he was snug in his bed under the net I poured tepid water on him from his *bodna*. As he came out of the net shouting, sputtering and cursing, people told him I had peed on him! Whatever he had in his mind, he wouldn't have been able to catch me if his life depended on it. After this he liked me even less. He was also a poet of sorts.

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<sup>23</sup> In the late seventies, I was an instructor in the Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA). Insofar as training leaders for battle was concerned, the training in Murtee was second to no established military academy.



He wrote to sum up the situation: *What a thunder Yahya committed a blunder!*

He also penned one on me: *Mr. Dipu<sup>24</sup> you are not only obnoxious but also rustic and pungent.*

One could only take humor and jokes so far and occasionally the perpetrator exceeded limits. Moin was a big prankster. Once we were in the firing range to fire LMG<sup>25</sup>. He was in the same detail as Rafiq, a former college professor and older than most of us. Rafiq expected his seniority to be respected and would often express his displeasure at the pranks of his younger course mates. When the detail was getting ready to fire, Moin casually told Rafiq that since he was a good looking man his sister must be too. "So, how about letting me marry her; I can give her beautiful babies every year!" he said cheerfully. A maddened Rafiq picked up the loaded LMG ready to do the worst. Only timely intervention by the officer instructors brought the situation under control. Both Rafiq and Moin were punished although Moin's was far more severe. He got extra drill for the next 30 days where he had to be in the assault course half an hour after lunch and the punishment continued till dusk. Although he was thoroughly chastened, when Moin returned to the barracks after the extra drill, he would be laughing and joking with everyone including Rafiq.

During exercises, sometimes, we would be divided into opposing forces. If one group was patrolling, the other group would lay an ambush. If the patrol was ambushed, it had to break away. We used blank ammunition for these exercises. Even though this was training, the tempo was quite high as was demonstrated by Waliul Islam, the ambusher who placed the barrel of his rifle on Niranjan Bhattacharya's chest and fired. Although it was a blank round with a cork and not a bullet, Niranjan had to be evacuated in a tea garden tractor with a burn hole in his chest and the cork embedded in his pectorals. It had to be removed surgically.

On the other side of Murtee Nullah was the Jaldhaka reserve forest. It was a large forest that was home to many wild animals

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<sup>24</sup> Dipu is my nickname.

<sup>25</sup> LMG is light machine gun.

including several herds of wild elephants. Occasionally, the elephants would come out of the forest to feed on the paddy. These were dangerous animals and sometimes there would be fatal accidents when man got in the beast's way. After our arrival in Murtee, a *Mukti Bahini* recruit was trampled to death by elephants. Following this accident, Indian army sentries with live ammunition would accompany us whenever we went out for night exercises. One night, one group was in defense and the other group was supposed to launch a night attack on the defenders. I was in the defense party. We were waiting in our trenches, when we heard sounds as though something was moving through the paddy fields. After a while, we could see the outline of elephants in the moonlight. Jalalabadi, who was watching the scene wanted to alert everyone about the impending danger. In his excitement, he mistook Captain Yadav for Phiru Bhai and squeezed his butt saying "*Phiru Bhai Hati Hati*". Amused and surprised, Yadav responded with his usual wry humor and said: "Gentlemen those are elephants, elephants are as big as tanks and to destroy tanks we need anti-tank mines. Do we have any? No! So, let's run!" We got to safety without any injuries.

As we got familiar with our surroundings, some of us started taking liberties. Every Friday, a village market would assemble in the valley which the local population used. Most of the items sold there were agricultural produce or simple hand tools. No market is complete without its food vendors and this one had a couple. Some of us would sometimes make clandestine visits to the Friday market for edibles<sup>26</sup>. The offerings were rather limited mostly Gurkha food, but we enjoyed going there anyway. Once we bumped into some of our officer instructors and were prepared to face the music but they did not make any fuss and the matter was never reported. After this we became bolder and would venture out every Sunday. We mostly went to New Mall or other nearby towns and bazaars for a real meal that we washed down with cheap beer or rum.

Wing Commander Khademul Bashar, Commander Sector 6 would come to Murtee often for meetings with Brigadier Joshi.

<sup>26</sup> The people who went to the Friday market regularly were Mizan, Munib, Didar, Shahriar, Manzoor, Samad, Kaiser, Moin, Matin, Sadeq and I.

After finishing his work, Bashar would come and spend some time with us. A man of pleasant disposition and confident demeanor, he seemed like an inspiring commander. Occasionally, he would bring us fruit baskets and when he did so everyone got a piece of orange or apple. Bashar would update us about the progress of the war. From him, we learnt about the defection of several Bengali army officers from West Pakistan. One group included Major Manzur, and Major Taher, who were now Sector Commanders of Sectors 8 and 11 respectively. This group also included Major Ziauddin who was now commanding 1 East Bengal, his parent battalion. Sometimes, Bashar would also bring us magazines and newspapers that had articles about the liberation war and the *Mukti Bahini*. In one of those magazines, we read about the mass defection of Bengali submariners who were undergoing training in France. These submariners along with new volunteers were now training to become naval commandos in some undisclosed location<sup>27</sup>. They went into action on August 14, Pakistan's Independence Day. By November, the naval commandos had effectively rendered the Chittagong and Chalna ports un-navigable. They sunk more than fifty thousand tons of ships and damaged in excess of sixty five thousand tons. The action of the naval commandos demonstrated that the Pakistan Army was isolated and they could not expect to be supported logistically from West Pakistan. In another magazine, we read about the valiant battles of Captain Sultan Shahriar Rashid Khan of Sector 6 which was Bashar's sector. Shahriar had escaped from Pakistan along with Captains Salauddin Mumtaz, Mohiuddin Jahangir and Khairul Anam<sup>28</sup>.

One day, Mahbub Alam, a cadet of the Pakistan Military Academy (PMA) joined our group. He had escaped from Pakistan to join the liberation war. From him, we learnt that most Bengali cadets in PMA had no specific knowledge of what was happening

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<sup>27</sup> Naval commandos were trained in the Bhagirothi River near Murshidabad.

<sup>28</sup> Captain Salauddin Mumtaz embraced martyrdom with 1 East Bengal in the battle of Kamalpur. Earlier, in another operation he entered a Pakistani bunker and got involved in a hand to hand scuffle with a Pakistani officer whom he killed with his bare hands. He received *Bir Uttam* for gallantry. Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir was martyred in the battle of Chapai Nawabganj for which he received the highest gallantry award, *Bir Shreshtho*. I shall have more say about Jahangir in the next chapter.

in their homeland. Whatever information they had was from the radio news of the BBC and VOA. They did not communicate with their families about the situation in East Pakistan. About a week before our passing out, Bazlur Rashid and Saifullah, also PMA cadets joined us after escaping from Pakistan.

The provisional government was isolated in its exile. Beside India, it had no contact with any other sovereign government. India was the only government that was speaking about the human tragedy in Bangladesh. Given the American and Chinese support for Pakistan, both the Indian government and the provisional government felt that Bangladesh should try to open up channels of communication with other nations. To that end, both governments decided that a Bangladeshi delegation would be included with the Indian contingent during the United Nations General Assembly Session. This would give the foreign minister of Bangladesh the opportunity to make the case for his country to all nations of the world.

To bring the Bangladesh liberation struggle to a successful conclusion, India had to find a credible deterrence to the American and Chinese threat. To that end, India started negotiations with the Soviet Union. The aim was to sign a treaty that would bring the Soviets into the conflict as an Indian ally if the Americans or the Chinese entered the fray. One issue that was hindering the progress of negotiations was the decision of the provisional government to preclude leftist volunteers from the *Mukti Bahini*. The Soviets insisted that unless pro-Moscow and other leftist volunteers were allowed in the *Mukti Bahini* in sizeable numbers, the Soviet Union and other eastern bloc countries saw no reason to support the Bangladesh liberation struggle. The Soviet Union also insisted that the provisional government be expanded to include pro-Moscow and other pro-liberation leftist leaders in a national government.

Mrs. Gandhi sent her former ambassador to the Soviet Union, D. P. Dhar, to Calcutta several times to impress upon the provisional government the importance of this issue. The tensions reached such a level that at one point Dhar told the Bangladesh Acting President and Prime Minister that India would not entertain any request from the provisional government unless

Tajuddin and Syed Nazrul Islam both agreed and jointly made the request<sup>29</sup>. Tajuddin understood the importance of this issue but the rest of the cabinet was not agreeable with Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed being the most vehement in his opposition. Given the geopolitics of the cold war, the only alternative to not acceding to the Soviet demand was to line up with America. That was not feasible for several reasons, the most important one being that the Nixon Administration had sided with the Yahya regime. In the absence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, most Awami League leaders were not capable of taking difficult decisions although every decision during the liberation war had its complexities and was therefore difficult. After much debate and discussion, on September 8, the cabinet approved the formation of a 'National Consultative Committee' which included leaders from the National Awami Party (Muzzafar), the Congress Party and the Communist Party. At the same time, a decision for including leftist volunteers for *Mukti Bahini* was approved by the cabinet with the expectation that eventually twenty thousand would be trained. However, this committee remained an ineffective body largely due to the shenanigans of Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed<sup>30</sup>.

The American policy at that time was to find a way to isolate India in the international arena. To accomplish that goal, the Americans were pursuing two strategies. One was to bring pressure on the Government of India to recognize the Provisional Government of Bangladesh through rightist pro-western political parties and the American lobby in India. If the Government of India recognized Bangladesh prematurely, the Americans could then characterize the liberation war as an Indian conspiracy to break up Pakistan which would create the right conditions for the matter to be discussed in the Security Council of the United Nations. The Gandhi Government understood the ramifications of a premature recognition fully and did not give in to pressures.

The other initiative was to break up the leadership of the provisional Government of Bangladesh. To that end, the Americans established contact with Foreign Minister, Khandakar

<sup>29</sup> Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

<sup>30</sup> Khandakar Mushtaque on Tajuddin's request tabled the proposal for creating the National Consultative Committee in the cabinet.

Mushtaque Ahmed, through the American Consulate in Calcutta<sup>31</sup>. Zahirul Qayyum, a MNA from Comilla, was the conduit between the Americans and Mushtaque<sup>32</sup>. Mushtaque had repeatedly expressed his desire to present the Bangladesh case before United Nations. Their plan was to have Mushtaque propose for a confederation with Pakistan under the six-point framework provided all charges of treason against Sheikh Mujibur Rahman were dropped<sup>33</sup>. Of course, Mushtaque did not have the cabinet's approval to make such a proposal. As a matter of fact, he kept his intentions secret from everyone in the cabinet. After March 25, the leaders of the provisional government in spite of their disagreements on specific issues understood that the population of Bangladesh would accept nothing short of full independence. Had Mushtaque been able to pull this off, he would have pulled a complete coup on the Awami League leadership and pro-liberation forces.

For this plan to succeed, absolute secrecy was a must, and that is where the Americans failed. Indian intelligence agencies were keeping Zahirul Qayyum under watch. They were suspicious about his frequent visits to the American Consulate and picked him up for interrogation thus foiling the conspiracy. Mushtaque never went to New York to present the Bangladesh Case. Following this revelation, Mushtaque was effectively relieved of his cabinet position although he remained the Foreign Minister on paper. From then onwards, Abdus Samad Azad performed the task of Foreign Minister<sup>34</sup>.

After failing to implement the 'Mushtaque Plan' or getting India to make the mistake of according premature recognition to

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<sup>31</sup> The Foreign Ministry of Bangladesh was not located in Theatre Road; it was housed in Circus Avenue (former Deputy High Commission of Pakistan)

<sup>32</sup> In a background briefing to the Senate, Kissinger said that the Americans had the approval of the Pakistan Government to contact Sheikh Mujibur Rahman through his defense lawyer about the compromise. See *Congressional Record, Senate*; December 9 1971; p. 45739. Sheikh Mujib was a prisoner and he had no contact with the outside world. He had no information about the progress of the liberation war. On top of that, Mujib's trial had started in camera in Layalpur Jail. He was in no position to give any opinion.

<sup>33</sup> Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution*; London: Zed Press, 1979.

<sup>34</sup> J. N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999.

Bangladesh, the Americans advised the Yahya regime to give a civilian face to the crisis in Bangladesh. In the month of August, the regime planned to hold an election in East Pakistan to elect 'pro-Pakistan' public representatives. To that end, they cleared ninety four Awami League MNAs for the forthcoming elections.<sup>35</sup> The elections were never held because there were no takers. The Yahya regime then announced an amnesty and invited the 'misguided' who had crossed over to India to return. They set up reception camps in the border areas and again, there were no takers. Then, in their infinite wisdom, the Yahya regime announced that a new constitution for the country would be published in December where the President of Pakistan would always be from West Pakistan while the Vice President would be from East Pakistan. The eastern province would have 'limited autonomy'. They also wanted to replace the Bengali script with Arabic in Bangla writing as was proposed by Jinnah in 1948. One cannot help but ask if there were any thinking men in the Yahya regime or were they all inebriated all the time like its leader?

Having failed in the initiatives mentioned above, Yahya Khan recalled Tikka Khan to West Pakistan and appointed one Dr. A. M. Malik, an elderly Bengali physician, as the Governor of East Pakistan. With Malik as Governor, a civilian cabinet of collaborators was sworn in as provincial ministers. Most people had never heard of Malik. How he could help Yahya in resolving the crisis was not clear. Malik was only Governor in name; real authority remained with Niazi and Rao Farman Ali.

After the formation of the National Consultative Committee, Tajuddin was once again under attack from certain quarters of the Awami League. This time the anti-Tajuddin lobby was being led by Abdur Rab Serniabat<sup>36</sup>. Serniabat was married to Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's sister. Like Moni, he too had clout with Awami Leaguers being related to Mujib by marriage. He had forty south western party members sign a memorandum demanding the

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<sup>35</sup> If elections were held, it would have been rigged. The leaders of West Pakistani political parties including Bhutto had several sessions with military intelligence to distribute National Assembly seats in East Pakistan. See Rafi Reza, *Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Pakistan 1967-1977*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1997.

<sup>36</sup> Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

removal of Tajuddin from the post of the prime minister and general secretary-ship of the party (Annexure C). Their gripe was that Tajuddin had diluted the control of Awami League over the provisional government. Of course, Serniabat was not aware of the circumstances under which the National Consultative Committee was created and Tajuddin could not tell him the background because of secrecy requirements<sup>37</sup>.

Our commandant, Brigadier Joshi and the chief instructor, Lieutenant Colonel Dasgupta, never interacted with us directly. They would watch us from a distance and if they had anything to say they would tell it to our instructors. That was their style, I guess. Some time in the middle of our stay, Sheikh Kamal became upset because some Chhatra Union boys had gotten into Murtee. At that time, he was not aware of the government's decision to include leftist volunteers in the *Mukti Bahini*. Samad was a well known member of Chhatra Union (Menon Group) in Dacca University. Kamal wanted Samad to be thrown out of Murtee or to create a condition so that Samad quits on his own. We tried to dissuade Kamal.

"Why are you doing this? Samad Bhai is a great guy and we all know him for such a long time."

But to no avail. Samad, on the other hand, handled himself very well and never lost his cool.

Inevitably, Kamal's attitude triggered a tension and it went up the chain of command until it reached the ears of the Chief Instructor, Colonel Dasgupta. He came to our wing one day around lunch time and called for Kamal. For the next two hours, he made Kamal stand at attention while he yelled at him in Bengali. *Ja bamboota dilo*<sup>38</sup>!

"You are Sheikh Mujib's son! Your country is fighting for independence and you have started strife to create divisions

<sup>37</sup> J. N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999, reports that the Government of India was very concerned about the inability of Bangladeshi politicians to keep secrets. Once, Mrs. Gandhi planted false information on certain cabinet ministers of the provisional government to see how long it took the Indian intelligence to pick up the planted information from their sources. It came back to Mrs. Gandhi in four hours.

<sup>38</sup> The Bengali equivalent of 'gave a big rocket'.



amongst yourselves! Do you think your country will ever become free if you act like this?"

All this was happening next to our barracks and we all watched the colonel as he went on and on and on. Kamal never showed any interest in this matter again and he got along well with Samad for the remainder of our stay in Murtee.

Our course was originally planned for eighteen weeks, but sometime in early September we were informed that the duration of the training was reduced to fifteen weeks due to requirements of the battlefield. We were all happy at the prospect of finishing early. Some parts of the curriculum, especially lessons in signals and logistics, were reduced. In spite of the tough training and the physical hardship, we were a happy lot. We shed a lot of sweat and tears, and the diet was never adequate but it didn't matter. There was terrific camaraderie, everybody was jovial, and spirits were always high. Everyone wanted to go to the battlefield and fight the Pakistanis.

We went on a field firing exercise where live artillery and mortar shells and machine guns were fired over our heads to familiarize us with the sights and sounds of the battlefield. It was a great experience to hear the swoosh of artillery and mortar shells as they flew over our heads and exploded in front of us. We fired two-inch mortars which was an easy weapon to use. The last drill in the field firing exercise was with grenades, a very important weapon for guerillas and infantry. There were four pits, each with a cadet and an officer. Each cadet was given two grenades. The drill was you take off the pin, lob the grenade and duck. After the four grenades exploded the "all clear" signal was sounded. You repeat the same drill for the second grenade. At the signal of "lob", our friend Sachin Karmakar lobbed the pin and dropped the armed grenade inside the pit! In a flash, Captain Yadav grabbed it and hurled it outside as both ducked. The grenade exploded harmlessly. Yadav was not done with Karmakar. "You bloody joker! You want to kill me? You dropped it here? I don't mind if you kill yourself but why do you want to kill me?" The offender was relieved of the second grenade and Yadav ordered him to do front roll for a mile. When he was done, Karmakar was half dead.

Before finishing our course, we went out for our last comprehensive exercise that lasted several days. The last phase of

the exercise was to take up a defensive position in the Jaldhaka forest on a hill that was filled with boulders. We had to dig foxholes and trenches all night. Abul was the OP<sup>39</sup>. He did not help anyone; instead, he slept away the entire night under a tree while we labored away. It was hard work as we had to dig out many rocks and small boulders. In the morning, Abul woke up, went up a tree and began scanning the area with his binoculars. He had to look busy; the officer instructors would be arriving to inspect our defensive position. He trained his glasses on the river nearby where some women were bathing. He was taking in the view to his heart's content when Captain Yadav appeared below.

"Abul, what are you doing up there?"

"I'm the OP sir, keeping a watch on the front."

"Oh, is that right? Come down, and let me have a look."

Abul came down.

"What were you watching?"

"I was watching the river bend sir."

"Give me your binoculars."

Yadav took a look and then passed the glasses to one of the cadets: "He's a good OP; he was watching the river bend. You want to have a look? Here, look!" The cadet focused on the river bend and all he could see were these half naked women bathing.

"That's the enemy, right Abul?" Asked Yadav.

"Yes sir" he replied. Abul had to front roll for half a kilometer.

We did not expect to have any passing out parade but we were told that we were going to have one. There was not enough time to practice parading with weapons. Also, we did not even have proper uniforms for such a parade. All of us got a pair of khaki trousers and shirt but the tailor forgot to style the trousers 'military style'. Consequently, we could not use web belts and without belts, we weren't going to use any head gear either. Nevertheless, we practiced the drill a couple of times.

We were anxious about our assignments and asked our instructors if they knew anything. All they could tell us was that

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<sup>39</sup> OP stands for observation post.

postings were being handled by the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters. The only thing they could say for certain was that Bazlur Rashid and Saifullah, who only joined a week ago, would not pass out. However, they would participate in the passing out parade as stick orderlies. One assignment was certain and that was of Sheikh Kamal; he was going to the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters in Calcutta as ADC to the C-in-C<sup>40</sup>.

As the passing out day drew closer everyone was excited and enthusiastic to go to the battlefield. We were aware of the risks, aware that many of us would not survive the war but no one was perturbed. There was death all around us from the day we joined the *Mukti Bahini*. Almost every day there would be a *janaza*<sup>41</sup>. But that did not dampen our spirits. We were ready, as ready as we could ever be.

On October 9, we passed out. The event was more like a university graduation ceremony as opposed to a military academy passing out parade. We did not wear any belt or headgear and we did not do any march past. The Acting President inspected our guard of honor and then we were all called individually to receive our commission parchment from the President. Sayeed Ahmed was awarded the C-in-C's cane for best overall performance. The three former cadets of the Pakistan Military Academy or Pakistan Air Force Academy got one day seniority over us even though their performance was not adjudged to be at the 'top of the class'. The logic behind this decision was never explained except that this was Osmany's decision. Osmany was attaching a higher value to the contribution of former cadets of Pakistani academies than the rest of us. Merit counted less than 'Pakistani pedigree'. Many felt that this was discriminatory, but nobody took up the matter officially, given the circumstances.

After the passing out ceremony, we had the best lunch ever at Murtee: pulao, chicken curry and dessert. During lunch, we met the dignitaries of the Provisional Bangladesh Government. Osmany had re-grown his moustache. He seemed to be in a jovial mood when he spoke to the new officers. Only Kamal and those

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<sup>40</sup> ADC is acronym for aide-de-camp.

<sup>41</sup> *Janaza* is the Muslim funeral prayer.

posted to 'K Force' units had received their orders. Osmany assured us that over the next one or two days everyone would receive their orders. Tajuddin did not eat; instead, he used the time to talk to as many of us as he could. He inquired about our families, if they were safe and so forth. He liked the fact that the majority of the new officers were former university and college students. When he spoke to me, he reminded me that our objective was to win the independence of our country and not every battle. "Remember a guerilla leaves a losing fight today to fight another one to win. Don't take unnecessary risks". He also said that many *Razakars* were landless farmers. Because of the war, these people had lost their livelihoods. They had no option but to become *Razakars* to look after their families. Their hearts were not with Pakistan. Many would join the *Mukti Bahini* if they could and we should treat them kindly.

For the next two three days, the posting orders trickled in piecemeal. As individuals received their orders, they left for their units. Every departing batch was seen off by our instructors. Sometimes, we would accompany them. Their parting advice was: be careful and do not take unnecessary risks. No sentimentalism, just what hardened professionals tell novices. Finally, Kaiser, Awal Chowdhury, Aminul Islam, Rafiqul Islam and I received our orders. We were the last batch to leave Murtee. We were all going to Sector 7 that covered part of the Dinajpur district and all of Pabna, Rajshahi and Bogra districts. It was the biggest sector of the liberation war. Lieutenant Colonel Quazi Nooruzzaman was the Sector Commander. Our movement order said we were going to Balurghat, which Kaiser and I knew from our days with 3 East Bengal. That evening, we boarded the train to New Jalpaiguri. Our Squad Commander Captain Sarjan Singh saw us off. We would have to change trains to reach Balurghat.

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## Sector Seven

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We said goodbye to Murtee and boarded the train that evening. As much as we were excited there was also self doubt. Were we truly ready to lead men in battle? Would our weaknesses show in the face of the enemy? Only time would tell. We arrived in Balurghat in the morning. Charlie Sector of the Indian Army had sent transportation<sup>1</sup>. After a short ride, we arrived at the Sector Headquarters, located in a mango orchard in Tarangapur. The entire camp was made up of tents although they were well camouflaged from air observation. The Sector Commander, Lieutenant Colonel Quazi Nooruzzaman, welcomed us. There were two other officers; Major Maqsul Choudhury, an AMC<sup>2</sup> officer who was no longer seeing patients; he was inducting newly trained guerillas inside the country. Flight Lieutenant Rahim was the logistics officer.

Using a map, the Sector Commander briefed us on the sector deployment. The sector had five sub-sectors. Sub-Sector 1 was on the northern tip covering the Thakurgaon area. This Sub-Sector did not have any Bangladeshi military officer as its commander. An Indian officer was in-charge and his main task was to induct and coordinate guerilla operations. Sub-Sector 2 was headquartered in an Indian border village called Hamzapur. The now promoted Captain Idris was the sub-sector commander. Kaiser and I had met this EME Officer when we were in Raiganj. Colonel Zaman

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<sup>1</sup> Charlie Sector was the Indian Army formation headquarter working with Sector 7 of the *Mukti Bahini*. Brigadier Prem Singh was the Charlie Sector Commander.

<sup>2</sup> AMC is the abbreviation for Army Medical Corps.

described him as a capable commander who was giving the Pakistanis a hard time. His area of operations was Dinajpur district. Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir, a recent escapee from Pakistan, was commanding Sub-Sector 3 in Mohidipur. His area of operations was the Chapai Nawabganj sub-division. He was from the Corps of Engineers. Sub-Sectors 2 and 3 were the most active in Sector 7. Major Gyasuddin Chowdhury was an infantry officer of the Frontier Force Regiment seconded to the EPR in Naogaon before March 25/26. He was now commanding Sub-Sector 4. Gyas's force was in Lalgola, on the western bank of the mighty Padma. Colonel Zaman visited Lalgola only once. The Sub-Sector was constrained in conducting operations because of the major natural obstacle, the river Padma. Sub-Sector 5 was also on the south-western bank of the Padma River in Kazipara. The Sub-Sector commander, Major Abdur Rashid, an infantry officer of the Baluch Regiment, was the adjutant of Rajshahi Cadet College when hostilities broke out. Colonel Zaman had never visited Kazipara and never met Rashid. Like Lalgola, launching operations from Kazipara was difficult because of the Padma<sup>3</sup>.

He then briefed us about the deployment of guerillas inside the country. Except Sub-sector 1, the other sub-sectors were not inducting guerillas directly; it was being done by the Sector Headquarters. Once inducted, the sub-sectors had operational control on the guerillas. The Sector Commander was concerned about his inability to use the guerillas to their fullest potentials, mainly because of inexperience and shortage of trained guerilla leaders. Up until that point, there was only one officer in each sub-sector, and he had too much on his plate. The Sub-sector Commanders could not devote much time for guerilla operations. JCOs and NCOs did not have the skills necessary to plan and coordinate guerilla operations. University and college students who had acquired experience in guerilla operations and demonstrated leadership qualities could perform this task. However, that would require evaluation which was time

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<sup>3</sup> It was not clear why these two sub-sectors were not redeployed or if there was any reluctance from any quarter to leave their comfort zone. Not visiting these two sub-sectors was probably Colonel Zaman's way of letting people know that the deployment was not to his liking. Like the provisional government, the *Mukti Bahini* also had problems following a unified strategy.

consuming and was not yet done. Colonel Zaman wanted this situation to change and desired more involvement of guerillas in sub-sector operations. "If the regulars and guerillas can conduct joint operations, then our results would be better than what we have accomplished so far," he said. Planning and coordinating operations with guerillas was not easy because of communication deficiencies. The only way to contact guerilla groups inside the country was through messengers, or as I later found out, by infiltrating into Bangladesh and linking up with them.

The sector had received several hundred newly trained fighters in the past few days. They were organized in companies and were bivouacked in Tarangapur. All the fighters were *Gono Bahini*, or guerillas, but the Sector Commander had decided to use them as regulars. The new second lieutenants would command these companies. We were introduced to our companies. Most in my company were from Chapai Nawabganj area. Kaiser and Amin were sent to Sub-sector 2. I was going to the Mohidipur Sub-sector under Jahangir. Rafiq and Awal would remain in Tarangapur for the time being and train their companies.

We were to leave after lunch; I could see the trucks lined up. I spent a few minutes with my company to familiarize myself with the platoon and section commanders and take stock of the weaponry. It was less than what it was supposed to be; every section<sup>4</sup> did not have a LMG. On average, there were 2 LMGs in a platoon as opposed to one in every section; Pakistanis had 2 LMGs in their sections<sup>5</sup>. Some riflemen did not have the semi-automatic rifles, i.e., SLR<sup>6</sup>. They had .303 rifles; and some of the .303 rifles had grenade firing (GF) launchers. It was a good guerilla weapon, even though it was of WWII vintage. It had a launching cup attached to the muzzle. A grenade with a seven-second fuse is inserted in the cup after removing the pin<sup>7</sup>. When you fire a blank, the grenade lever comes off and the grenade is catapulted 100-120 meters, roughly 75-100 meters further than what an individual could lob.

<sup>4</sup> Ten men make up a section

<sup>5</sup> My platoons had one third the firepower of a Pakistani platoon. Three sections make a platoon.

<sup>6</sup> Self-Loading Rifle (SLR) was the standard rifle of the Indian Army.

<sup>7</sup> The ones lobbed by hand had a 4-second fuse.

We learnt about this weapon in Murtee and I was glad I had them. My company did not have any rocket launchers, recoilless rifles or heavy machine guns, but we had more two inch mortars than what was authorized. After lunch we left for Mohidipur.

Our convoy reached Mohidipur around dusk. I started to look for Captain Jahangir. Part of the Mohidipur camp was in Indian Territory and the other part was in Bangladesh. Right ahead of us was a defensive embankment which dated back to the ancient *Gaur* period. The Indian Army and BSF had taken up defense there. Beyond the embankment was Bangladesh territory. A brick top road linked the border to Chapai Nawabganj and eventually to Rajshahi<sup>8</sup>. The *Mukti Bahini* defensive line was about two miles inside Bangladesh.

There was a lot of activity going on. People were scurrying about with weapons and ammunition. It was obvious they were getting ready to go on a patrol. After I had my company fall in, I ran into someone who looked like a JCO or NCO. I introduced myself; he saluted and said he was Havildar Major Malek. He was aware of our arrival. I asked him about Captain Jahangir and he pointed him to me.

I had actually gotten down in front of Jahangir, but he did not give me any attention. He didn't look anything like an officer as he stood in front of one of the patrols. A short statured bearded man in lungi and a grey bush shirt, PT shoes and a *gamchha* knotted around his waist. An AK-47 was slung from his shoulder. I went over, saluted and introduced myself.

"Oh, you've come? Good, good. *Hatiyar ki achhe?*" (What weapon do you have?)

"I have a 9mm Sterling Sten sir..."

"*Arey dhur!* I don't mean you. What weapons do you have in your company?"

I told him.

"You've had a long day. Rest tonight and I shall talk to you in the morning. Malek will show you your bivouac area." With that

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<sup>8</sup> Today, it is a two-lane asphalt road with the land customs station of Sona Masjid at the border.



he left. Shortly afterwards, he disappeared into the night with his patrol. My first impression was that Jahangir was a plain-speaking, no nonsense type of a person. He dressed just like his men and probably did not allow himself any perks that would have set him apart.

That night we bivouacked on the Indian side of the camp. I woke up before stand-to and made sure that everyone in my company was following the drill<sup>9</sup>. After the stand-to ended, I headed for the FDLs<sup>10</sup> to meet Jahangir. A few days before my arrival, he was in an Indian Army hospital after being wounded in an unsuccessful attack on Argarharhat. He left the hospital without a proper discharge before his wound had properly healed. The Indians were not amused. I found Jahangir under a tree in one of the depth positions. Someone brought us campstools and the standard *Mukti Bahini* breakfast; a mug of tea and a triangular *puri*. In broad daylight, I got a good look at Jahangir; he had a boyish face and was probably not a whole lot older than me<sup>11</sup>. His most striking feature was his piercing eyes. As we sipped tea and munched on the *puri*, we talked about the war and how we should go about doing our business. He seemed concerned about the training and the skill set of the new fighters. The enemy had more firepower and better trained soldiers. Since joining the war, he had undertaken several operations and was unsuccessful in most of them because of inadequacies. Our fighters needed more training, especially on battle drills and battle craft. Jahangir wanted me to spend the next couple of days doing just that. I still didn't know my men and with the experience and knowledge of a raw second lieutenant, I was unsure about my abilities to train a company.

"What training should I give them?" I asked.

"Don't worry," he said sensing my dilemma. "You train them so that they can perform the task you will give them in battle. I am assigning some good NCOs to your company and they should be helpful. You can't take this company into battle before you know

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<sup>9</sup> In the field, every day, 15 minutes before first light to 15 minutes after and 15 minutes before last light to 15 minutes after; every soldier is in his battle position with his weapon fully prepared.

<sup>10</sup> FDL stands for forward defensive line.

<sup>11</sup> Jahangir was 23 years old.

your men and they know you. The training should help you know each other."

Jahangir then took me around the FDL and explained the deployment. The Sub-sector HQ was housed in a couple of government buildings beside a *dighi*<sup>12</sup> called *Balia Dighi*. Sona Masjid, a fourteenth century mosque, was behind the Sub-sector HQ. It was a cultural heritage site. Major Najmul Haq, the previous sector commander was buried there. The old mosque was beautiful and it would be a tragedy if it got damaged or destroyed because of the war. Jahangir's bunker was on the edge of the *dighi* although he seldom slept there at night; he preferred a bunker in the FDL. Sometimes, Jahangir would swim in the *dighi* which was the only recreational activity he allowed himself. As I became familiar with him, I learnt Jahangir gave most of his allowance away to several refugee families keeping only a small amount for himself for buying toiletries and the like. He wanted me to consider doing the same.

I spent the next couple of days training my company and getting to know my men. Most were from rural areas, sons of poor farmers with very little education. Some could not even read or write. There were about a dozen university and college students from Rajshahi District. Many had suffered at the hands of the Pakistan army; in a few cases, family members were shot in front of their kith and kin; others had their homes burnt. Everyone seemed motivated and eager to fight the Pakistanis. As we trained, it became clear to me that we did not have the firepower to suppress well-entrenched enemy positions; we'd needed more LMGs and some rocket launchers. On the third or fourth day of training around noon, Jahangir asked me, "So how is the training coming along?"

"Fine, sir," I said.

"Okay, how about doing some practical training?"

"What practical training?" I asked.

"Tonight, take a platoon and go on a patrol to Dhobra. How many two-inch mortars did you say you have?"

"Eight, sir."

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<sup>12</sup> *Dighi* is a large pond.

"Take three to four mortars with you. Once you reach the enemy defense, harass him with mortar fire and then come back."

The task meant we'd have to go about eight to nine miles inside Bangladesh, get within 300-500 meters (mortar range) of the enemy, fire our mortars and then return to camp. This was Jahangir's idea of practical training.

"Look, everything that you have learnt about patrolling, map reading, et cetera, will be put to test tonight," he said.

As I was trying to grasp the order, Jahangir said, "Get the patrol party ready. I will brief you in the evening. I will also give a guide and you should have no difficulty."

This was a serious assignment with very real dangers. The only other 'operation' I had participated in, was bringing Shafayet Jamil's family across the border from Dacca. Besides that, I was just a paper tiger who has had fifteen weeks training in Murtee. But there was no point in indulging in self-doubt. This was my first operation and I had to demonstrate to my company that I was worthy of their confidence and trust. I chose Havildar Anisur Rahman's platoon for the task<sup>13</sup>. Anis was originally from 3 East Bengal, but he did not accompany the battalion to Tura because of family problems. A native of Chapai Nawabganj, Anis was a good soldier, responsible and dependable, and I had found him useful in the training we were doing. I told Anis about the task.

"Don't worry sir, we'll be with you," he assured me, "and we have done a lot of operations like this. It's nothing." Of course it's nothing. He didn't know what I was going through.

I decided to take three mortars and had every individual carry two mortar rounds for the operation; a total of sixty rounds. I gave Anis instructions adding that he tell the boys to rest because tonight no one was getting any sleep. I then opened the map to see the terrain we were going to cover. Just as we were taught in Murtee, I made a navigation plan with bounds of every couple of hundred meters. After Jahangir's briefing that evening, I took out my navigation plan and showed it to him. He seemed amused. "You want to use the map? Please do," he said, "but the guide I

<sup>13</sup> The other platoon commanders in my company were university and college students.

have given you, knows the area very well and he should be able to take you to Dhobra without problems.”

I was not too crazy about depending entirely on the guide whom I did not know. I attired myself like everyone else; lungi with a triple knot with the hem raised to my knees for ease of running, a *gamchha* around my waist which was my ammunition pouch, and jungle boots. The patrol set off around eight in the evening using my navigation plan. After the first 2-3 bounds, the resemblance between the ground and the map faded. For instance, there was no pond where there was supposed to be one according to the map. We had outdated maps; I folded my navigational plan and put it away. Now, I was totally dependant on the guide. I understood the reason for Jahangir's amusement. We avoided entering villages. Every village had dogs that would bark when strangers approached. The barking would give away our position and alert the enemy. After walking for more than three hours, the guide stopped. Then he peered into the darkness and pointed at something ahead. “That's the Pakistani defense,” he said. In the dark I could only make out the silhouette of trees. I was a jittery second lieutenant and not readily convinced. I called Anis and he seemed cool. He was from this area and knew the lay of the land. He agreed with the guide. The only way to know for certain was to draw fire. The patrol took position along the side of a pond and the mortars were readied for action<sup>14</sup>. I instructed a LMG detachment to go about three hundred meters from the main patrol and fire in the general direction pointed by the guide. “You return when we start the mortar fire,” I told them. And that is exactly what happened except that they did not actually go three hundred meters, they only went about fifty meters and fired. They didn't want to get lost when the music started. The Pakistanis did not respond to rifle fire, but the LMG bursts woke them up. As soon as we saw their muzzle flashes, our mortars opened up. Each mortar fired twenty rounds in rapid succession: *Dhoom! Dhoom! Dhoom! Dhoom!* I had no idea that the *Mukti Bahini* could fire mortars so quickly. I had thought we'd require at least a minute to fire two-three rounds, but before I realized it, Anis told me we

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<sup>14</sup> The banks of the pond provided cover that should have masked the flash when mortars were fired.

had fired all! The LMG detachment rejoined the main body. As soon as our mortars landed, the entire enemy defense opened up in our direction. Tracers were flying over our heads as we started loping back. I had planned to hook up with Shahjahan<sup>15</sup> who commanded a guerrilla group in the Kansat-Shibganj area, but dropped the idea. We didn't even stop to rest and reached our forward lines around dawn. It was a nine-hour ordeal. Jahangir was very happy. A brand new second lieutenant had been sent with a bunch of mostly rookies like him with the exception of Anis to raid an enemy defense at night. We had accomplished that and returned safely, a bit winded, but largely unscathed barring the allowed bumps and scratches. In fact, he was so relieved he didn't even debrief us properly! The entire patrol, everyone, said the same thing; the experience boosted the confidence of my men. Jahangir was right; it was a good practical training for the new fighters.

I continued to train my men. The fellows who went to Dhobra told the others about their experience. The company was beginning to jell and Jahangir seemed to have more confidence in us. He began to treat me more like a peer as opposed to a rookie. As we talked, I learnt more about him. Jahangir's father was a singing minstrel (*baul*) in a remote village of Barisal called Babupara. The family never had enough. He was a good student and once during a School Inspector's visit, Jahangir caught everyone's attention because of his good mathematical abilities. During his high school years, he moved in with his maternal uncle because there was no suitable high school in his village. After his SSC, he enrolled in BM College in Barisal from where he finished his HSC. Jahangir entered Dacca University in the Statistics Department and in his first year, he was selected for training in the Pakistan Military Academy. After commission in the Corps of Engineers, Jahangir was posted in the Karakoram Highway Construction Project where he worked as a demolition expert. After the events of March, he became restless and felt agitated about the situation at home. In the first week of July, he went on leave to Sialkot supposedly to visit a shrine. Instead, he teamed up

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<sup>15</sup> Shahjahan Mia later became a MP from that area (Shibganj-Kansat) several times on a BNP ticket. Before the war he was a lecturer in economics in Chapai Nawabganj College. He was wounded twice fighting against the Pakistan army.

with three other Bengali officers and crossed over to India to take part in the liberation war.

Jahangir was instinctively a guerilla. He had read Mao and Guevara and he firmly believed that a guerilla was a fish in the sea of humanity. He took that literally. "You must look like the masses, so that people cannot distinguish you from the masses; strike from nowhere and vanish into the crowds". That's why the lungis; that's why the *gamchha*. That's the way he ran it. The only thing that gave the *Mukti Bahini* away was our footwear, our jungle boots. One could hide weapons but not those; I couldn't walk barefoot and neither could many others including Jahangir.

The Sector Commander would visit our Sub-sector at least once a week, if not more. On one of these visits, Brigadier Prem Singh, the Charlie Sector Commander was with him. This was my first meeting with Prem Singh. He was older than Colonel Zaman and they seemed to have a good rapport. Prem Singh liked Jahangir a lot and called him 'my commander'. I had a brief and interesting discussion with Prem Singh. I told him that with the firepower we had we would not be able to get an upper hand on the enemy in a firefight. We needed more firepower; LMGs, and rocket launchers. Without rocket launchers, we would not be able to dislodge the enemy from entrenched positions<sup>16</sup>. Prem Singh agreed and promised to get us more LMGs adding that he may be able to get us some rifle-launched anti-tank grenades, if not rocket launchers.

My company was moved from the depth position and deployed in the FDLs on the western side of the defense. After I settled down there, Jahangir sent me on a patrol to link up with Shahjahan. "Take a section," he said. It was a day-night patrol and this time I took different group of people than those who went to Dhobra a few days ago. I reached Shahjahan's hideout without any difficulty. Shahjahan had more than twenty guerillas in his group and they had hideouts in several villages. Being a former college professor and a brave leader, he commanded the respect of his

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<sup>16</sup> By October, all Pakistani defenses were entrenched and fortified. All weapon positions were in bunkers and pill boxes that were connected with five feet deep communication trenches. The enemy could only be dislodged from these positions if we had weapons that could destroy them.

men. He was a local who had established a good intelligence network. He knew a lot about the enemy's movements and their habits. His group undertook several opportunistic ambush operations. In one such ambush, he received injuries and had to be evacuated. He had returned from an Indian military hospital only a few days ago.

Jahangir was hardening his troops. When I returned, he told me he was contemplating another attack on Argararhat. The last time, he was unsuccessful. He was more confident this time because of the increase in ranks. His plan was a dawn attack with two companies, his and mine. I wanted to reconnoiter the objective before the attack. Jahangir agreed and suggested I do the reconnaissance as early as possible. Like Shahjahan's group, we had a guerilla group near Argararhat led by a fellow called Kamal.

After a day of rest, I set out again at night with yet another new section to link up with Kamal. One of Kamal's boys was my guide. We reached the place in the wee hours of the morning. Except for two sentries, the rest were sleeping. Kamal was awakened and I met him for the first time. He was a college student and there were twelve in his group; most from the same area. They had only one LMG. The rest had rifles and some SLRs. I told him I wanted to have a good look of the area during the day and did not mention anything about our plans for Argararhat. Being very tired, I soon dozed off. I was woken by Kamal when it was bright outside; my watch said it was past nine. They had made us special breakfast; *khichuri* and eggs. After breakfast, I took my LMG detachment and set out with Kamal and another fellow from his group. The rest of my men waited in the hideout.

The countryside was a vast expanse of dry and dusty fields. The fields should have had crops. This was the time to plant winter vegetables but they were empty. Because of the war, farmers did not plant anything. Many homesteads were empty although every village had a few people. The war had brought unprecedented misery to the villagers. In addition to the horrific terror perpetrated by the Pakistanis, there was no work or income; provisions stocked by farmers were depleted and yet people were hanging on to their precious lives in their homes because anywhere else they would be worse off. We stopped at a village to rest and the inhabitants gave

us water and *muri*. I did not want to accept the food, but the villagers insisted saying that was the least they could do.

As I went around the area, I had a good look at Argararhat. It was a village bazar on raised ground surrounded by a bunch of trees. On the western and south-western sides there was a canal; not very wide but it could become a formidable obstacle under fire. I asked Kamal about the depth and he said one could not wade across; one would have to swim to get to the other side. He felt there were more than two platoons and one of them was EPCAF<sup>17</sup>.

I returned to Mohidipur and reported to Jahangir. He knew the area and the lay of the land from his previous attack. We started our preparations. Jahangir was going to adopt the same plan he had used earlier; a frontal attack where the final assault would be through open ground, the enemy's main field of fire. I did not like the plan because I feared we'd get bogged down and incur many casualties. Most importantly, we may not succeed. I told Jahangir my views, but he still felt we could succeed; he was banking on the larger attacking force. The three-inch mortar platoon was split in two detachments; one to support the attack by moving it close to Kamal's hideout<sup>18</sup>. We had two Vickers .303 heavy machine guns (HMG); one would accompany us for the attack. The HMG would provide covering fire from a fire base when we began the assault<sup>19</sup>. A lot of patrols began prowling around Argararhat but they did not contact the enemy. This was October and the Pakistanis were hunkering down. They did not venture out at night. The night belonged to us. They left their defenses only during the day, in groups of 3-4, all heavily armed, and only if they had to fetch something from the villages or marketplace; they never ventured out alone. They liked the security in numbers. And the best security for them was to remain within their defense.

The day before the attack, we moved out of Mohidipur before midnight and reached the assembly area near Kamal's hideout

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<sup>17</sup> East Pakistan Civil Armed Forces (EPCAF) was raised to replace the EPR. The majority of EPCAF members came from other para-military forces of Pakistan and some were recruited from the non-Bengali community of East Pakistan.

<sup>18</sup> The Sub-sector had a mortar platoon with six 3-inch mortars that were manned mostly by students although there were a few ex-EPR men.

<sup>19</sup> Location of the fire base had to be near a water source because the Vickers, a weapon that pre-dated the First World War was water cooled. The man with the bucket had to bring water when the machine gun barrel got hot.



without any incident. The three-inch mortars were deployed in the assembly area. We had not registered any mortar targets. Target registration started when we were forming our assault line. It was difficult to see where the mortars shells were landing because of the darkness. The MFC<sup>20</sup> was with Jahangir and once they were satisfied that the shells were landing on the objective the attack got underway. My company was on the right and Jahangir's on the left. The ground on my side had more cover. After we broke cover, both companies would have to assault the last couple of hundred meters through open fields to reach the objective. The Pakistanis opened up once the mortars started firing. As soon as we broke cover, we got bogged down in the open fields just as I had expected. There was no way to push forward; enemy automatic fire covered every inch. On the walkie-talkie I heard that 2-3 people in Jahangir's company were hit and were being evacuated. I checked my company; no casualties yet. We were seeking cover behind *aeels* or anything else we could use. We were lucky that they were not throwing mortar or artillery at us or there would have been many casualties.

I spoke to Jahangir on the walkie-talkie; his company was also bogged down. He was probing to find a weak point in the enemy's defense and asking me to do the same. I told him we could not remain in the open for long and needed to get behind some real cover. Jahangir understood and ordered me to fall back; he too was falling back. I could sense the relief in everyone when I gave the orders to fall back. No matter how stuck soldiers may be, the moment they are ordered to withdraw they always know how to get out. In the assembly area, I found some elements of Jahangir's company. The mortars were down to their last few rounds; they would not be able to cover us, if we attempted another assault. After Jahangir's arrival, we took stock of the situation. Both of us agreed that nothing more was possible; we had been at it for more than three hours. The attack was called off. As we were falling back, we ran into a convoy of bullock carts; I did not know what it was when someone told me that it was our F-echelon<sup>21</sup>. The

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<sup>20</sup> MFC stands for Mobile Fire Controller, the person who controls and corrects mortar fire. Our MFC was a student of Rajshahi Polytechnic Institute named Nawsher.

<sup>21</sup> F (fighting) echelon are vehicles that bring immediate replenishments to the battlefield. In our case, it was bullock carts because we did not have vehicles.

quartermaster was bringing us ammunition replenishments and food; one chapati-dal sandwich for each.

At camp, Jahangir began thumping an EPR Naik who was supposed to have been manning the Vickers machinegun from the fire base. He had left much before the withdrawal order and that made extrication difficult for others. In war, commanders sometimes got physical; and Jahangir too had his moments.

Although we had failed, I was satisfied. The rookie fighters of my company had experienced battle for the first time and everyone's nerves held. We stayed together as a company and no one abandoned his position in panic.

For the next couple of days, Jahangir and I discussed our failed attack in great detail. Colonel Zaman always maintained that Jahangir was the most active commander in his sector, but Jahangir was dejected. "We've had no success, we can't capture any place," he said.

He was also frustrated: "Our boys cannot overpower them".

"Sir, don't blame them," I said. "You have to give these boys a reasonable chance of survival in battle. You are telling them to attack frontally when bullets are coming straight at them, while they have to rush and capture the place. That's asking a lot; even I will not do it".

"Our tactics have to change; we cannot assault over the enemy's field of fire. We either attack their flanks or their rear; the directions they are not pointing their guns, a direction from which they are not expecting us".

In Murtee, we were repeatedly told that a guerilla must surprise the enemy; a guerilla attack has to be a bolt from the blue! "Attack the enemy at a place where he is not expecting you, at a time when he expects you the least, and from a direction that he has not covered", our instructors would tell us. In offensive operations, it is imperative to establish some sort of superiority over the enemy; even if that is for a short period. We could not expect to do so with our firepower; the enemy was not only stronger; he was also fighting from entrenched positions. The only option available was to do it tactically. We could attack the enemy's rear, but that would mean infiltrating the attacking force behind

enemy lines. Infiltration by large groups is difficult. However, if we could coordinate with our guerilla groups inside the country, we could succeed. Jahangir agreed. We discussed our ideas with the Sector Commander and Prem Singh. They were impressed, especially our use of innovative tactics. When we requested Prem Singh for artillery support he said he could get the BSF twenty five-pound battery to support us, but Indian officers could not enter Bangladesh for operations. Colonel Zaman, an artillery officer, volunteered to be our FOO<sup>22</sup>.

I was given the task to coordinate the infiltration with Kamal. Getting behind the enemy would involve crossing the canal with stealth without taking too much time. I rejected the idea of using bamboo bridges because it would have to be constructed at the crossing site and that could give away our intentions. Kamal said he could make a pontoon bridge with country boats fairly quickly; the boats could be assembled at the crossing site on the night of the attack without the enemy finding out. Jahangir and I accompanied the Sector Commander when he registered the artillery targets two days before the attack. On the night of the attack, I left early with Kamal to ensure that the pontoon bridge was in place on time. At the crossing site, Kamal's boys were working on the bridge in total darkness. Jahangir arrived with the two companies, his and mine, and the crossing took place without a hitch. The plan included a diversionary attack from the front; they would not break cover and the Sector Commander would be with them to direct artillery fire. Once we were in position, we broke radio silence and called for artillery. When we heard the shells land, we started our assault as the first rays of sunlight appeared in the horizon. The enemy only discovered us when we were about thirty meters away. To be attacked from behind is very disconcerting; one feels cut off because the rear is gone and the enemy is behind you. It was too late for them to engage us and there was a mad scramble as they started fleeing in all directions. The EPCAF, because they were in the depth locations, was the first position we hit from the rear. They ran first and the *Razakars* saw no reason to stick around. Some got killed trying to escape. A bunker received a direct hit and there

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<sup>22</sup> FOO is the acronym for forward observation officer; his task is to direct artillery fire in battle.

were three dead bodies inside. In another bunker, we found blood-stained saris and women's hair leaving nothing for our imagination. We took three prisoners and captured a lot of ammunition, as well as one AK-47 and a couple of Chinese rifles. I claimed the AK-47 and gave up my Sten. We took Argararhat in less than an hour without any casualty.

Jahangir was convinced we had learned good tactics at Murtee. This was the first time the Sub-sector had successfully dislodged the enemy. Jahangir was very pleased as was the Sector Commander. The attack showed that with good planning and preparation, our rookie fighters could prevail on the enemy. And Colonel Zaman was right; if regulars and guerillas operated in a coordinated manner, our results were better.

We expected the enemy to counterattack. Jahangir ordered me to start digging and get the defense ready. As I was deploying my LMGs, I saw a large contingent of civilians coming towards us with shovels and other digging tools; they were going to help us dig trenches. They came voluntarily; we did not ask for them. By late afternoon we were dug in. The Sector Commander and Jahangir left with his company once the defense was ready and it was now my job to defend Argararhat. I spent the next couple of days there with my company, patrolling the area heavily especially at night. The Pakistanis did not try to re-take Argararhat.

Argararhat gave me the opportunity to know my company intimately. I was with them twenty four hours a day; we ate together, slept in the same place and talked about our aspirations in an independent Bangladesh. Most were realistic: The big question in everyone's mind was how to pick up the pieces of their past lives and get on with life after the war? Rebuilding homesteads would be the first task for many. Where would the money come from? They did not know. The problem was worst for those who had lost their fathers or the head of household. They viewed collaborators as bigger enemies than the Pakistan Army, because to them the army was only a tool of repression in the hands of the collaborators. Collaborators fed information to the army and based on that the army killed people, burnt homes and committed other egregious crimes. After the war, some of these young fighters would have to take charge of their families and that scared them. Would there be any government assistance and relief for them? By

and large, most freedom fighters were disheartened by the conduct of political leaders who did not seem interested in the welfare of the common man; they only looked after themselves, their families and their cronies. However, there was also great faith in Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. They felt that if he were able to come back from Pakistan, things would change for the better. With so much death all around, a question almost everyone had was, would the country remember and honor them for their sacrifice and contribution for the liberation of Bangladesh?

In the third week of October, the United Nations General Assembly session ended. Fifty five out of one hundred and seventeen nations that made presentations referred to the 'East Pakistan' crisis<sup>23</sup>. The Soviet Union, New Zealand, Mongolia, Sweden and India categorically stated that the settlement of the 'East Pakistan' problem had to be political based on the will of the people. The others only emphasized how to avoid the potential military conflict between India and Pakistan encouraging both countries to tone down the rhetoric and withdraw their military from the border. Pakistan was leading the diplomatic war as most countries did not want the break up of Pakistan, even though Pakistan was conducting a dreadful genocide on its own citizens. The contribution of the Nixon Administration in steering the governments of the world towards Pakistan was significant. However, by then the world had seen images of the genocide and popular opinion was generally against the Pakistani regime.

To bolster the diplomatic campaign, Indira Gandhi set out on a nineteen day world tour to visit major capitals of the world in the last week of October. The purpose of her visit was to explain the catastrophic problem created by the arrival of ten million refugees in India. She received a sympathetic and supportive hearing in Moscow. In Paris, the French President was sympathetic to the human tragedy, but it wasn't clear if the French would tow the American line or if they would have an independent position. Britain's response was non-committal. Mrs. Gandhi, however, made several poignant points in her meeting with the British press. She compared the genocide in 'East Pakistan' with the Nazi

<sup>23</sup> J. N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999.

genocide and asked her interviewer if Britain could remain in the sidelines when Hitler's marauders were trampling Europe? Even though she was not successful in changing the official position of governments, she made an emphatic and forceful case for Bangladesh to the people of those countries. Her meeting with Nixon was tense and cold. Privately, Nixon even admitted to his aides that in her shoes his position would have been similar but he was not wearing her shoes<sup>24</sup>.

From the last week of October, the Soviet Union started shipping weapons and ammunition to India in anticipation of the impending war with Pakistan. The weapon shipments were made under the arrangements of the Indo-Soviet Friendship Treaty. America, on the other hand, had officially suspended all military aid and sales to both India and Pakistan; an outcome of Congressional debates. However, the Nixon Administration secretly arranged military assistance for Pakistan from pro-western Islamic countries. Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iran had lent warplanes to Pakistan. Afghanistan and Iran allowed the Pakistan Air Force to use their airfields. Nixon's main concern was that India might push Pakistan out of Azad Kashmir in which case the possibility of Pakistan breaking up into its constituent provinces was very high. The break up of Pakistan would upset the geopolitical balance in South Asia.

Before leaving for abroad, Indira Gandhi told Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin that she would decide on the timing of the war after her visit. She had not yet made this revelation to her senior cabinet colleagues. Outside her team of advisors, only the President and Prime Minister of Bangladesh were given this information. In his excitement, Syed Nazrul Islam revealed Indira's plan to several senior Awami League members and from them it was leaked to others, much to the embarrassment of the Indian Prime Minister<sup>25</sup>.

The Pakistani military junta had come to the end of its rope; the harder they tried to dig themselves out of the quagmire, the deeper they sank. They were unable to find a way out. Given the desperate

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara* '71, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

situation on the ground, Lieutenant General Gul Hasan, the Chief of General Staff of the Pakistan Army felt that starting a war with India was the only option to save Pakistan from disintegrating. Gul Hasan was of the view that if Pakistan got entangled in open hostilities with India, UN intervention would result in a cease fire and that would provide the desperate lifeline that the Pakistan Army and Government needed. Furthermore, a war with India would save the Pakistan Army from the ignominy of defeat at the hands of the *Mukti Bahini*. The situation was so desperate that Yahya Khan had even agreed to hold talks with Mujib nominated Awami Leaguers if there were no charges of treason against them<sup>26</sup>.

On 20-21 October, the Awami League held its second council in Calcutta. The council reviewed the activities of the provisional government (Annexure D). Although a few weeks earlier, Serniabat along with his followers from the southwest districts had started a campaign to have Tajuddin removed from office of the Prime Minister, no such motion was tabled at the council. Except for a handful, most Awami Leaguers in the Council were supportive of Tajuddin. Sheikh Moni, who had opposed Tajuddin vehemently in the first council in Shiliguri, did not oppose him in the October council. The council created a sub-committee under Kamaruzzaman, the home minister, to assess the control of the party over the government. Kamaruzzaman's committee recommended that "no time should be lost in inducting effective party control over the government which is an Awami League government and in formulating policy and action program with regard to the liberation struggle"<sup>27</sup>. Although this recommendation was not binding on the government, it was nevertheless at variance with Tajuddin's policy of keeping the government machinery apolitical.

By the end of October, Osmany had largely turned into a recluse removed from the conduct of the war. He was busy writing the service and military law manuals for the Bangladesh Army.

<sup>26</sup> The perpetually inebriated President of Pakistan did not see the inherent contradiction in his position.

<sup>27</sup> Muyeedul Hasan, *Muldhara* '71, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

Because of Osmany's idiosyncrasies, Tajuddin was making all important military decisions for the government<sup>28</sup>.

Privately, Tajuddin was skeptical about what life would be like in independent Bangladesh. To his private secretary, Faruk Aziz Khan, he would often say in despair "Bangladesh will be free soon, but will we be able to live in our country"<sup>29</sup>? Tajuddin understood that sycophancy and high handedness would be a challenge to the rule of law and in building of national institutions. Without these two essential ingredients the benefits of independence would remain a lofty ideal for most of his countrymen. To achieve their selfish goals, the youth leaders would use every tool of intimidation including assassination; Tajuddin had first-hand knowledge of these tactics, as he was targeted. He knew that sycophancy would lead to nepotism as was already happening in the youth camps. And nepotism would shut-off most economic and other opportunities for the ordinary man. This could make the Awami League unpopular. The nation would require unity to come out of the destruction and ravages of war but if some elements of society were to remain above the law, disunity would set in. Only one man could set the course of the newly independent country in the right direction and that was Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, now a prisoner in West Pakistan.

Starting in October, the military assistance from India increased substantially, both in terms of quality and quantity. After the commissioning of the Murtee officers, the *Mukti Bahini* operations became more sophisticated. Instead of just hit and run operations, the *Mukti Bahini* was now targeting the enemy's main lines of communication. The Pakistani positions on the ground were getting increasingly isolated. They were confined to their bunkers and pill boxes. If they ventured out, the likelihood of being ambushed or attacked was very high. By November, the average daily casualties for the Pakistan army in Bangladesh was around twenty. Such high casualties were having a devastating effect on the morale of Pakistani soldiers<sup>30</sup>. The only thing that a

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Tajuddin was assisted by the Chief of Staff, A. K. Khandakar.

<sup>29</sup> Faruk Aziz Khan, *Spring 1971*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1993. Tajuddin, of course, was referring to the high handedness of the Awami youth led by Moni.

<sup>30</sup> Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.



Pakistani soldier in Bangladesh wanted was to go back home alive. He was no longer keen in 'saving Islam or Pakistan' or in teaching the Bengalis a lesson.

Coming back to my neck of the woods, Rafiq joined the Sub-sector with his company and was deployed in Bholahat, north of Argararhat. Before Rafiq, there was a contingent there under an EPR JCO. Bholahat was a Bangladeshi enclave with Indian Territory on three sides. It had a rail station that connected the border to Gomastapur. After the crackdown of March 25/26, train service never resumed. Jahangir wanted me to link up with Rafiq and patrol the area between Bholahat and Argararhat. The next day, I took a patrol to Bholahat and spent the night there. The place was a haven for smugglers and the prosperity was visible. There were many masonry buildings in this remote border village, something quite uncommon in rural Bangladesh in 1971. Rafiq seemed settled. One of those buildings was his company headquarters. In the evening, he treated us to a good meal with large *Koi* (Climbing Perch) fish. The freedom fighters of Bholahat sometimes fished with explosives in the nearby *Bhatia Beel*, a large water body.

A few days after my visit to Bholahat, Jahangir recalled me from Argararhat. I cannot recollect who relieved us. In Mohidipur, I found that more newly trained fighters, about company strength, had joined the Sub-sector. Jahangir split these new fighters between his company and mine. My company now had six platoons.

Dr. Moinuddin Montu, a physician and MPA from Kansat was an important member of the Zonal Administrative Council and he visited Mohidipur regularly. He was one of the few elected representatives who maintained close links with the *Mukti Bahini*. Montu tried to be helpful in whatever way he could. He even participated in a few operations with Jahangir before my arrival. Both, Jahangir and the Sector Commander had good relations with him. Our Sub-sector did not have any experienced doctor or a field aid station. Although we had a couple of internee doctors and medical students who could provide first aid and take care of emergencies, the condition was not satisfactory<sup>31</sup>. Casualties had to

<sup>31</sup> Dr. Mizanur Rahman, who later became the Director General of Health, Government of Bangladesh, was one of the internee doctors in Mohidipur who was more interested in being a guerilla fighter than a physician.

be evacuated to either Indian military hospitals or to Dr. Joshi's outpatient clinic<sup>32</sup>. Every time Jahangir met Montu he would pester him for medical supplies and Montu always tried to be helpful.

In addition to being the Sub-sector Commander, Jahangir was also commanding a company. Besides fighting, he was dealing with more problems than it was possible for one person to handle. As more fighters joined the Sub-sector, logistical and administrative problems increased manifold. On top of that, every individual had some problem or the other which required Jahangir's personal attention. The sub-sector needed a person, preferably an officer, civilian or military, to handle logistics. We had information that a certain Lieutenant Enamul Haque, a native of Chapai Nawabganj had crossed over to India and was now living with relatives in Malda. Jahangir contacted him and invited him to the Sub-sector HQ through some of his relatives who were in our Sub-sector. After much persuasion, he agreed to come. Jahangir scheduled the meeting when the Sector Commander would be present.

A couple of days later, Enam came to Mohidipur. Jahangir and I were also present in the meeting. Enam was a tall individual with a good physique but he seemed nervous. Colonel Zaman opened the conversation with the usual inquiries: when did he cross the border, where was he staying in Malda, what was he doing, et cetera. Enam was not doing anything; he was simply hiding in Malda. Colonel Zaman told him that to the Pakistan Army he was a deserter and a rebel, irrespective of whether he joined the *Mukti Bahini* or not. He implored him to join; we needed all the help we could get. Enam responded that he was from the EME; he was not a fighter. Colonel Zaman assured him he would not be given any combat assignments; he would have an administrative job. He was going to BDF HQ soon and could have Enam assigned to Mohidipur Sub-sector as logistics officer and Enam could even stay with relatives in Malda if he liked.

No amount of persuasion could convince Enam. It surprised me a great deal that a Bengali military officer, who deserted the

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<sup>32</sup> Dr. Joshi was a retired physician who had volunteered his services for Bangladeshi refugees. In addition to the refugees, he also took care of the *Mukti Bahini*.

Pakistan Army and crossed over to India, was unwilling to make any contribution to the liberation war, even in a non-combat capacity<sup>33</sup>. This was true of many young and able university and college students especially from middle class families. I had met some of them in Calcutta. On one occasion, Sultana Zaman, Colonel Zaman's wife, had asked a female MPA why her two university going sons had not joined the *Mukti Bahini*? The MPA replied that her boys were intellectual types not suited for fighting, implying that combat was the task for lesser beings.

The Sector Commander informed us that we were getting six new 81mm mortars and should start raising a new mortar platoon. Prem Singh had found anti-tank grenade launchers for us and we would receive them shortly. Finally, we would have a weapon that could be used against entrenched positions.

Colonel Zaman wanted us to plan another offensive operation. He had his eyes on Dhobra, which was the gateway to Shibganj and eventually to Chapai Nawabganj. Jahangir was not sure. Dhobra was a more formidable objective than Argararhat. Capturing Dhobra would require a lot more preparation as well as more firepower. Jahangir felt that attacking Shahpur would be more suitable than Dhobra. Shahpur was a bulge jutting into the liberated areas. It was located northeast of Argararhat and controlled the road to Gomastapur. After our capture of Argararhat, the EPCAF platoon that was in Argararhat reinforced Shahpur which now had two EPCAF platoons along with *Razakar* elements. Some of the *Razakars* in Shahpur were secretly in contact with Jahangir. They had even indicated that if the right opportunity came they would desert en masse and join the *Mukti Bahini*. Jahangir was quite sanguine that the information was accurate.

Another reason for choosing Shahpur as the next objective was that the Pakistani units there were extremely repressive. They frequently picked up people from the area for beatings and torture. Some never returned. There were also reports of rape and women being held as sex slaves. The local peace committee was actively collaborating with the Pakistanis. Some peace committee members

<sup>33</sup> In 1973, I met Enamul Haque in the Bangabhaban where he was ADC to the President. He was claiming to be a freedom fighter! He retired as a brigadier. After retirement, he became a state minister in Sheikh Hasina's government in 2009.

were extorting money from villagers under the threat of informing Pakistanis about their 'anti-Pakistan activities'. Jahangir felt we should try and put an end to this mayhem.

Jahangir and I got busy preparing for Shahpur. I took a patrol to reconnoiter the objective. Once again, I tapped into Kamal's group for help. Shahpur was a large village and Pakistani entrenchments at the edge of the village could be seen from the distance. Unlike Argararhat, there were no notable obstacles around but cover was limited. It would be difficult to get close to the objective without the enemy finding out. Kamal, however, showed us a route which could get us quite close to the objective from the southeast side almost to the rear of the Pakistani entrenchments. Both Jahangir and I felt that our success would depend on how effectively we softened the objective with artillery and mortars.

Before the attack, Jahangir and the Sector Commander spoke to the troops to get them pumped up. This was also an opportunity for the men to vent their complaints as well as ask questions. Jahangir would deal with such situations with matter of fact answers that were sometimes blunt. A guy with a plea raised his hand. "Yes," Jahangir inquired.

"Sir, we have no helmets so when the enemy fires artillery or mortar we are in a lot of danger."

"*Arre beta*, you have no helmet, so will you just sit out the war? You won't fight? What will you tell your countrymen? Bangladesh didn't get its freedom because the *Mukti Bahini* didn't have helmets?"

The fact was we had very few helmets. Some we captured, but through most of the war our Sub-sector didn't have helmets for everyone; the Indians just hadn't got around to issuing them to us. I never wore one during the entire war.

Another young man asked: "Sir, will our names be written in golden letters in the history of Bangladesh, if we die in battle?"

"If we are killed in battle, we should consider ourselves lucky that our blood was spilled on the sacred soil of this land," Jahangir answered. "What greater reward can we have?"<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> The man who had asked this question was martyred in the battle of Shahpur and his commander who answered his query fell two days before the war officially ended.

Colonel Zaman registered the targets for the BSF artillery battery with Jahangir at his side. The attack got underway at first light. We got into assault formation as the artillery bombardment commenced. My company was on the left and Jahangir's on the right. Rafiq's company simulated a diversionary action from the northwest side. The artillery bombardment was quite intense and continued for about 20 to 30 minutes. The enemy abandoned their open trench positions, but continued to engage us from the bunkers. All of a sudden, I heard on the walkie-talkie that several *Razakars* had surrendered to Jahangir's company. Then, I saw a white flag being waved from one of the enemy trenches. We got close and asked its occupants to get out with their hands over their heads. Eventually, 3-4 *Razakars* got out and we took them prisoners. It was about midday, when the EPCAF abandoned their positions. It took us another hour or so, before we finally overran the enemy who left behind two dead. We suffered casualties; three were killed in my company and several were wounded; Jahangir's company also suffered casualties. We took more than twenty *Razakar* prisoners. After screening and several tests of loyalty, we raised a platoon from the *Razakar* prisoners and they remained loyal to our cause for the remainder of the war. At one point, I even got a former *Razakar*, Bilal, as my batman although I did not use him as a runner during operations.

Jahangir ordered Rafiq and me to set up the defense and get ready for the counter-attack. We dug in quickly with the help of the villagers and *Razakar* prisoners. I was to be with Rafiq in defense for the next couple of days. While we were busy with the defense, the Sector Commander and Jahangir gathered the villagers to find out about the collaborators who were helping the enemy and tormenting villagers. There was this man who was answering most of the questions asked by Colonel Zaman and Jahangir when his wife interrupted the proceedings and stated that her husband was lying and misleading us. He was in fact trying to dispatch the *Mukti Bahini* to an ambush trap. All the village men were detained. Jahangir then went out with a patrol to investigate. After a while, we heard firing from the direction in which Jahangir had set off. I contacted Jahangir on the walkie-talkie and he said that there was indeed an ambush laid, but he and his men never entered the killing zone. When Jahangir returned, he wanted to bump off the

collaborators, but Colonel Zaman prevailed and had them handed over to Charlie Sector Headquarters for interrogation.

While we were talking to the villagers, several village women had come out to listen. An old woman in tattered clothes arrived with something in her hand; it was an anti-personnel mine! It was a one and half inch thick disc that she had seen the bad guys bury on the edge of a culvert before they left the place. She had dug it up and brought it to us. She said “*Baba*, I thought they must have left this to harm you”. It was primed and just a little pressure from a finger could have detonated it. It was neutralized immediately.

Two consecutive successes in a row understandably made everyone upbeat. Even with our inferior firepower, equipment and skill set, we succeeded because of our tactics. One could feel the boost of confidence in the men; we could take the Pakistan Army in a fight and prevail. I stayed with Rafiq in Shahpur for a couple of days. The expected counterattack did not come. Rafiq and his men were left behind to defend Shahpur and I returned to Mohidipur.

Jahangir told me our next attack would be on Dhobra. Colonel Zaman was bringing Major Gyas from Lalgola to command the operation. We both felt that his presence would be good for us. Gyas arrived in Mohidipur the day before Eid-ul-Fitr (Nov 21) and I met him for the first time. He was no *lungi* clad commander like Jahangir; he was attired in khaki trousers, olive green jacket and high ankle boots.

The next morning, which was also Eid, Gyas gave his verbal orders using a large tarpaulin enlargement of the map. We were going to conduct an advance to contact operation with two companies; Jahangir's and mine. Gyas was the force commander. My company would be the Vanguard Company<sup>35</sup>. The BSF battery would be in support. Gyas would also direct artillery fire in addition to being the Force Commander. He would be behind the vanguard company. The 81mm mortar platoon was split in two detachments; they would leapfrog to support the advance. This was necessary for targets not covered by artillery and also to keep the usage of artillery within the limits of allotted ammunition. The MFC was going to be with me in the vanguard company.

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<sup>35</sup> Vanguard Company is the leading company in the advance.

I did not like the plan; it was too bookish and exposed all our weaknesses. We would have no surprise and the worst part was that we would probably have to launch our final assault through the main killing zone of the enemy's defense. However, being a second lieutenant with only one month's experience, I was in no position to make my objections be known.

The advance began after Eid lunch around midday. It seemed like an exercise in Murtee as my company started to move towards Dhobra in broad daylight. Initially, I had my company staggered on both sides of the road. After a while, as the sun began to slant on the western sky and we were getting close to the vicinity of Dhobra, I had the point platoon<sup>36</sup> deployed in assault formation astride the road as we continued to advance. We had not made any contact with the enemy, although I had a queasy feeling that hostile eyes were observing us.

The sun had set and we continued to advance in the dark. As commander, Gyas should have known that we did not have the capabilities to consolidate in the dark and understood its ramifications. We were close to a village when suddenly all hell broke loose as the entire enemy defense came alive, the night erupting with deadly fireworks! We were about thirty to fifty meters from them and we were caught totally by surprise as they poured small arms and machinegun fire on us. We could see the flashes from the enemy's weapons and hear the roar and the loud swoosh of bullets. We were in their killing zone and they had us where we were most vulnerable. I was lucky not to have been hit. The Pakistanis showed tremendous fire discipline. They were waiting for us. The only thing that saved us was the cover of darkness otherwise it would have been a massacre.

There was no time to think, one's reflexes took over. I hit the ground and started crawling backwards, lobbing grenades and firing along the way. It was total confusion. In the dark, I should have been disoriented, but for some reason I wasn't. I could hear men crying and shrieking in pain. I couldn't see very far. The men around me seemed okay. As I was crawling backwards my feet hit some stumps. It was a sugarcane field. I got inside trying to take

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<sup>36</sup> Point platoon is the leading platoon of the vanguard company.

whatever cover I could get from the standing crop. When I got behind the sugarcane field, the men with me began reloading their weapons. I checked mine; it was empty as were the extra magazines I had. All my grenades were gone. I quickly refilled my magazines and got on the walkie-talkie hollering at Gyas for artillery fire. He told me that he had a 'knee lock' and had already fallen back with the jeep! I was dumbfounded. Why wasn't I informed? "Where is the PRC-25"<sup>37</sup>? I asked him. He said it was with him. How was I going to extricate my company from this mess without artillery support? Jahangir who was about 400 meters behind me was listening to our conversation and came on the radio: "Where's the MFC?" he asked me. In the chaos, I had forgotten about him. Jahangir asked me to find him and bring mortar fire to cover our withdrawal. He would be with me shortly to help evacuate the casualties.

The men continued to straggle back in ones and twos. Some were wounded. I contacted my platoon commanders. Except for the point platoon, the other platoons were alright. Only the point platoon had bumped into the enemy. I tried to contact Nawsher, the MFC, and the point platoon commander; there was no response from either. After a while, I got Nawsher, just when I could hear him without the walkie-talkie. He was shaken up but not injured. I asked him if he had seen the point platoon commander. He said several men were stuck in the open, lying behind *aeels*, unable to lift their heads because of enemy fire. I asked him to bring mortar fire quickly and he got to work. Soon, mortar shells began to land on the enemy. Then, Jahangir arrived. He had sent several injured men to the rear in bullock carts because our lone jeep was with Gyas. As the mortars kept pounding, more men began to emerge from the dark including the point platoon commander. He was wounded in one forearm. We quickly tied a *gamchha* over it to stop the bleeding. People were helping the wounded to fall back. It was really hard evacuating those with leg injuries because they were unable to walk. Jahangir sent several probes to see if any wounded had been left behind. After we were convinced that everyone alive had been accounted for, we fell back. We were unable to bring back the dead.

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<sup>37</sup> Wireless set for contacting the artillery battery.



When we reached our defense, I saw Gyas walking normally and did not notice any problems with his knees. When Jahangir and I were alone, I told him that I was never going to participate in any operation commanded by Gyas and he said he understood. The two then went out of earshot for some pow-wow. Whatever transpired, Gyas left for Lalgola immediately afterwards, although he was supposed to spend the night at Sub-sector HQ. The operation was expensive in terms of casualties. Almost everyone in the point platoon had some injury or the other. Most were evacuated to Indian military hospitals. Eleven people were missing.

The Dhobra operation had an adverse affect on morale and almost negated the boost we had after the capture of Argararhat and Shahpur. One day, Dr. Joshi informed us that he had treated two college students with identical bullet injuries in the calf; both had burn injuries suggesting they were self inflicted. Dr. Joshi's main complaint, however, was that the two had been given morphine when they needed it but now they didn't, yet they continued to pressure the good doctor for it. He wanted us to do something about it. When those students learnt that Dr. Joshi had reported them, they deserted. We had a few more desertions, mostly college students. The boys from the villages, however, took misfortune in stride and stayed on.

Around that time, we began to feel the menace of the *Mujib Bahini*. There were reports that some of the students who deserted us had joined them. Then one day, we learnt that the guerilla leader, Kamal, who had played a crucial role in the capture of Argararhat and Shahpur, had left his group along with the LMG and joined the *Mujib Bahini*. Both Jahangir and I were surprised by the news. Kamal was a capable and resourceful guerilla leader; what made him desert? Jahangir brought up the issue with Dr. Montu who said that there was very little he could do. The *Mujib Bahini* was directly under the control of Sheikh Moni who was unlikely to listen to him. Nevertheless, Montu said he would try and retrieve the LMG. The LMG was never returned.

We received another batch of newly trained recruits. The anti-tank grenades that Prem Singh promised also arrived. These grenades were fired from the semi-automatic SLR after the grenade launcher was attached to the muzzle. The grenade itself looked more like a rocket than a grenade. To fire this weapon, one couldn't place the rifle butt on one's shoulders; it would dislocate the

shoulder. The butt had to be held against something solid and the grenade was launched by firing a blank round. None of our men had ever seen this weapon and therefore needed training. Charlie Sector sent a couple of Indian Army NCOs for the job. The training included live firing and we used the Sona Masjid BOP, now deserted, as the target. By the time we were done, the roof was blown to smithereens and the walls were pitted with holes. Although the weapon was not very accurate, it could nevertheless punch a hole on masonry walls with a bang and I liked it for that. Now, at least we had a weapon against bunkers and pill boxes.

A few days later, a platoon-sized Pakistani patrol bumped into our defense in broad daylight. Jahangir was in the FDLs and I was in Sub-sector HQ. When I reached the FDLs, I found Jahangir excited and panting. As the patrol was being chased away, some of its elements had got detached from the main body. Jahangir went after the stragglers trying to capture one or two but failed. He was particularly upset with himself because he had missed hitting any enemy even after he emptied an entire magazine from his AK-47. Havildar Anis of my company handled the situation deftly and for that he was promoted to Naib Subedar (JCO). The men who had first seen the enemy patrol had panicked, shouting, "They've come! They're here!"

It was Anis who rallied them with his own cries of: "Yes, they've come! Now shoot the bastards, you sisterf ...!"

They responded and chased away the hostiles with ferocious firing. Following this incident, a platoon was deployed in front of our defense as a screen position.

Colonel Zaman stopped by Mohidipur after his meeting at BDF HQ in Calcutta. With him were Bazlur Rashid (Bazlu) and Saifullah. The two had escaped from PMA, and joined us at Murtee just a week before our passing out but were not commissioned with us. BDF HQ had finally commissioned them as second lieutenants. They were now posted to Sector 7<sup>38</sup>. Colonel Zaman

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<sup>38</sup> After victory, the newly formed Bangladesh Army Headquarters rescinded the order of the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters commissioning Bazlur Rashid and Saifullah. They were advised to join the Second War course for the last leg of their training in Dacca. Saifullah did not bother, he went abroad to pursue higher studies and eventually he finished his doctorate in economics from the University of Paris. He now lives in Rome and works for the FAO. Rashid was commissioned with the Second War Course in Dacca and he got one day seniority over our course.

had convinced the Chief of Staff, Group Captain Khandakar and the Prime Minister that they had pretty much finished their training in PMA. Their course had passed out and their course mates were now officers in the Pakistan Army. So why shouldn't they be given commission in the *Mukti Bahini*? Tajuddin agreed with Colonel Zaman much to the disapproval of Osmany. Bazlu was joining our Sub-Sector and Saifullah was going to Hamzapur. Both Jahangir and I were very pleased to have Bazlu with us. Colonel Zaman had also brought along his fifteen year old son, Nadeem. He was going to join our Sub-sector. Jahangir assigned him to my company. Nadeem was very bright and well read for his age. After the events of March, he was packed off to Pakistan to live with his uncle. He didn't like it there and returned to Bangladesh. Shortly afterwards, he crossed the border and joined his mother and sisters in Kalyani. He was adamant about joining the *Mukti Bahini* and his parents eventually gave in. Nadeem was too young to be a section commander<sup>39</sup>. So, I kept him with me at company headquarters. Nadeem and I became good friends in spite of our difference in age.

We took two platoons from the new arrivals and one platoon each from Jahangir's and my company and raised a new company for Bazlu. Jahangir put Bazlu through the same routine that I had gone through; additional training for a couple of days, followed by similar 'practical training'. Like my 'practical training', Jahangir gave Bazlu a guide for the patrol. Nadeem accompanied Bazlu for his battle initiation. When Bazlu returned, we learnt that the patrol had run into trouble. As soon as the mortars fired, the entire Pakistani defense opened up while the guide went missing not to be found ever again. The guide was a collaborator. Bazlu had a man missing and we later learnt that he was captured by the Pakistanis and subjected to inhuman torture before he was killed<sup>40</sup>.

Shortly afterwards one evening, Jahangir gave Bazlu and me time off to go to Malda for some rest and recreation. We did not know Malda well and were looking for a decent restaurant, but could not find one. So, we ended up at the circuit house. We

<sup>39</sup> After the war, Nadeem suffered from severe depression for a couple of years before he ended his life with a pistol.

<sup>40</sup> He was skinned alive before he succumbed to his injuries.

ordered dinner; chicken, pulao and custard caramel. While we waited, we sipped cheap Indian rum with water. More than hour had passed by and there was no sign of dinner. When we inquired from the waiter, he told us that the chicken had just arrived from the bazar and it was being slaughtered as we spoke. We had no option but wait and load ourselves on more rum. The dinner finally arrived and this was my first decent meal after Murtee's passing out lunch.

Colonel Zaman moved his family from Kalyani to Malda. His wife, Sultana Zaman, was a professor of psychology in Dacca University<sup>41</sup>. The daughters, Naila and Lubna, accompanied their mother<sup>42</sup>. The family was put up in a nondescript one-bedroom house in Malda. Mrs. Zaman had good contacts in Calcutta and managed to obtain sanction from the West Bengal Government to allot her the necessary equipment for a field hospital for the *Mukti Bahini*. The equipment was meant for Bangladeshi refugees but it was never utilized by relief organizations. She had also found a Bangladeshi surgeon, Dr. Moazzem, who had spent several weeks in Calcutta trying to be of service to Bangladeshi refugees but the provisional government never got around to giving him an assignment<sup>43</sup>.

A few days later, Dr. Moazzem arrived in Mohidipur with the hospital equipment, tents and other medical supplies. Logically, the hospital should have been established in Indian Territory so that it would not have to be evacuated in a hurry. However, everyone, including Dr. Moazzem wanted it to be inside Bangladesh for sentimental reasons. With the help of internee doctors and medical students, Dr. Moazzem set up the hospital quickly inside Bangladesh territory beside the cemetery where many freedom fighters were buried<sup>44</sup>. Naila and Lubna volunteered their services as nurses and Mrs. Zaman effectively became the hospital administrator. The hospital had two large tents for patients and an operating tent. It was quite basic with

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<sup>41</sup> Mrs. Zaman completed her doctorate in psychology from Emory University after the liberation of Bangladesh.

<sup>42</sup> Naila was my contemporary in Dacca University.

<sup>43</sup> Dr. Moazzem migrated to the UK after liberation where he has a surgical practice.

<sup>44</sup> Today, the burial site is marked near the Sona Masjid land port.

many limitations; yet, it was a place where minor surgeries could be performed. The field hospital could also give first aid and arrest the bleeding before serious cases were evacuated to Indian military hospitals or the Malda hospital.

Mozzammel Haq, a businessman from Dacca joined the Sector Headquarters as logistics officer and Flight Lieutenant Rahim who held that position joined our Sub-sector in the same capacity. This became a little tricky. Rahim was senior to Jahangir but he was not a combatant. So, Jahangir remained the Sub-sector Commander, but he was courteous and respectful to Rahim and never involved him in any operational matters. The Sub-sector strength now exceeded seven hundred and arranging weapons, ammunition, rations and allowance for all these people involved quite a bit of paperwork and coordination with Sector HQ and Charlie Sector. Jahangir was happy that Rahim was looking after these aspects.

One morning, we received news that a fighter had been killed by friendly fire in Shahpur. A patrol was returning to the defense when a rookie sentry opened up on the patrol. Casualties from friendly fire sometimes happen in battlefield conditions. Every time such accidents occur, it has a debilitating effect on soldiers. Everybody was crest-fallen in Shahpur.

Two or three days after this incident, Shahpur was overrun by the enemy. Rafiq's company was manning the defense and they fell back to Bholahat. When the facts emerged, the indications were that they did not try to hold the ground and gave up too quickly. Rafiq was not even in Shahpur when the enemy attacked. He preferred to be in Bholahat 2.5 miles away and considerably safer. He made no effort to come to the rescue of the Shahpur defense. Jahangir was furious and decided to counter-attack immediately before the Pakistanis could dig in. We would attack with three companies; Jahangir's, Bazlu's and mine. One of the mortar platoons was going with us to support the attack. Jahangir ordered Rafiq to return to Shahpur and keep the enemy engaged so that they cannot dig in.

Jahangir's idea was to pound extensively with mortars to pulverize the enemy and then launch the assault. We took extra mortar ammunition in bullock carts for the operation. After walking for a couple of hours we reached Shahpur around

midday. The mortars were set up and the pounding began. Having occupied Shahpur for a while, the MFC had accurate grid references for every possible target on the objective<sup>45</sup>.

We knew the area well. I did not want to assault from the southeast since we had used this approach in the previous attack. They would expect us from there and would probably have that approach covered by automatic fire. Jahangir agreed. Also, from our previous attack, we knew they didn't have any mortar or artillery. Since they had not yet dug in properly, Jahangir wanted each company to probe for weaknesses from the southwest side. Although the Pakistanis were caught off guard by the direction of the attack, they fought doggedly. The battle continued throughout the day. Our student mortar-men did a great job. It was their effective pounding that finally made the enemy give up an hour before dusk. When we searched the area, we found five dead bodies. On our side, several people were injured but there were no fatalities. The enemy had left behind some cooked rice and raw mutton, but no one would eat that because it could be poisoned. The collaborators who had brought the Pakistanis were rounded up. Their fate was sealed; Jahangir was in a bad mood. He also gave Rafiq a royal dressing down and then packed him off to the rear in Bholahat.

Bazlu was given the responsibility to defend Shahpur and he performed the task successfully. A detachment of the mortar platoon was left behind. The Pakistanis had fallen back to Chowdhala, about a mile from Shahpur. Bazlu patrolled the no man's land aggressively and pounded the enemy with mortars. He made several probes and established contact with the *Razakars* there. Bazlu encouraged them to surrender which they eventually did. Once the *Razakars* surrendered, the EPCAF and other Pakistani para-military forces abandoned Chowdhala. Bazlu and his company occupied Chowdhala the following morning.

Both Colonel Zaman and Jahangir were now thinking of another attack on Dhobra, which was essential to open up Shibganj and eventually Chapai Nawabganj. We would launch a dawn attack. Unlike the previous attack, this time, we would attack their

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<sup>45</sup> Grid reference is a 6-digit map reference within one hundred yards.

right flank. We were going to use three companies; Jahangir's, Bazlu's and mine. Colonel Zaman would direct the artillery fire. Dhobra was a well prepared defense with alternate dug-in positions; it almost seemed as though there were layers of trenches. When we attacked the last time, the enemy had left some of the front trenches to draw us in. Also, we were not able to bring in artillery because Gyas had left with the PRC-25. This time, the artillery registration would be done as we got into assault formation. The attack would start with the first artillery bombardment and the other targets would be registered as the attack progressed. We had never done this before and it would require extensive coordination between us and the Sector Commander who would be controlling the artillery.

Everything seemed to be going according to plan. As we got into assault formation, I gave Colonel Zaman the target reference over the walkie-talkie. The first shot landed behind us. I gave him the correction: "Add 400 yards." He thought I was making a mistake and over-correcting. So, instead of adding 400 yards he added 200, but he did not tell me that he had amended my correction before ordering 'fire for effect'<sup>46</sup>. The battery fired and the shells fell on top of us! I literally saw my boys flung towards the sky, torn to pieces. I felt the shockwaves and was thrown up in the air myself. I got on the walkie-talkie and shouted to Colonel Zaman: "Stop firing! The shells are landing on us!" Mercifully, it ceased after the first salvo.

People were crying in agony; blood and guts were splattered everywhere. Nadeem was hit in one bicep. I tied a *gamchha* on his wound to stop the bleeding. An EPR Naik nearby had his left foot on his chest; his shinbone had been slashed away and he pleaded, "Sir, don't leave me here!" I assured him I would not and we pulled and dragged him to the rear. Almost everyone around me was covered in blood. People were helping each other, trying to stop the bleeding of the wounded, pulling back all the injured which was extremely difficult. Shrieks, screams and moans rent the air. Then someone told me I was bleeding from my left hand. *Oh, shit!* I hadn't realized that I had been hit, but the moment I heard it I began to feel the warm blood drip.

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<sup>46</sup> Fire for effect in artillery parlance means that the entire battery fires.

Jahangir heard what had happened on the walkie-talkie and ordered me to fall back. I told him I could not unless he came to my location and took over. I could not leave before evacuating all the injured. When he arrived, I showed him where some of the injured men were stuck in the mud. He said he would do his best to get them out. Bazlu and Jahangir then began to evacuate the casualties one by one. In the long drawn process, not all could be evacuated. Some had bled to death and were left behind. Many had been torn to pieces. Jahangir sent Nadeem and me back to the rear.

It was a very busy day at the field hospital. Dr. Moazzem and his team worked non-stop, wondering who to attend to first? Prioritizing was difficult. The worst cases were sent to Malda hospital after their bleeding was arrested. The ones who could not be attended to immediately were administered morphine to suppress their pain and keep them calm. I had lost quite a bit of blood and was feeling giddy; the adrenaline level had fallen off and I was beginning to feel the excruciating pain. I was also given morphine and told to rest. There were far more serious cases than me and they had to be attended first otherwise they'd die. Our field hospital did not have any x-ray machine and the surgeon could only remove those splinters that he could see or feel with his fingertips. If the splinter had traveled too far from the point of entry, he had no way of knowing. My turn came around dusk. I saw the surgery; the surgeon made two incisions then probed and groped to bring out four pieces of splinter<sup>47</sup>.

It was indeed a grim and very sad day for us – our first encounter with the darkest face of war. We had never lost so many men in one battle and that too by friendly fire. Colonel Zaman was mortified and hung around the field hospital the entire day with his boys. He readily admitted his mistake and didn't try to pass on the responsibility.

"I should have listened to you," he told me over and over. "I am so sorry, we don't want these things to happen, but sometimes they do."

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<sup>47</sup> Many years later, when I was having surgery on the same hand to remove a bone cyst, x-rays revealed that there were still three pieces of splinter in my left hand! They have been with me for forty-two years and are now a part of my person, and will go with me to my grave.



If his men did not love and revere him as much as they did, there would have been a lot of resentment. They understood that he didn't do it deliberately and he was not a coward either. It was just a horrendous error.

The following morning, I was in bed groggy from the morphine and other medications when I heard Shadhin Bangla Betar announce that our dear friend and course mate Ashfaqus Samad had been killed in action in Joymonirhat. It took me a few seconds to grasp the news. When Mrs. Zaman came to see me, I told her what I heard on the radio. She said she knew, but she did not tell me because she was not sure how I would react. Later I learnt that Samad died while manning an LMG giving covering fire to his company while it withdrew after their position was overrun. Had he not given the covering fire many men would have been killed<sup>48</sup>. I had difficulty sleeping that day; every time I dozed off I would see images of Samad Bhai in my dreams and I would wake up. Samad Bhai was one of the finest human beings in our course. He would often joke that he would get expended in this war as if he knew what was in store for him. Now, he was gone; how prophetic were his jokes, how cruel was this war.

While I was recuperating, I had a lot of time to listen to the radio. On December 1, Bangladesh and India had formed a joint command for operations in the eastern front. The news from the frontline indicated that Indian and Bangladeshi forces were about to launch the final drive to liberate Bangladesh. As a prelude to the final assault in the last week on November, the joint forces occupied the Belonia Bulge in Feni, Boyra in Jessore and several other strategic communication junctions including Akhaura. Niazi's strongpoint defensive deployment and his 'closed fist' strategy would now be tested. He began to close the fist, pulling back his regular forces from outlying areas but some fingers were broken and the hand could not be closed into a strong fist.

One morning, Bazlu informed us that the regular Pakistani elements in Gomastapur had fallen back to Chapai Nawabganj, leaving the defense of Gomastapur to *Razakars*. As soon as the Pakistanis left, the *Razakars* of Gomastapur decided that there was

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<sup>48</sup> Second Lieutenant Abu Mayeen Mohammad Ashfaqus Samad was posthumously conferred with *Bir Uttam*, the second highest award for gallantry.

no future in defending the Pakistani cause any longer and surrendered to Bazlu formally; more than a hundred of them. With the fall of Gomastapur, we were now across the Mahananda River. Gomastapur was connected to Chapai Nawabganj by road. This road led directly to the EPCAF lines in Chapai which was probably the strongest point of the Pakistani defense in that town. Jahangir and I discussed why the Pakistanis gave up Gomastapur without a fight and we felt that maybe they were baiting us to attack Chapai along the Gomastapur axis. We both felt it would be a mistake to take the bait.

December 3 was my birthday; I ended my teen years alive and that was a lot to be grateful about. I didn't think anyone in the Sub-sector knew or cared. I was, however, pleasantly surprised by Naila, Lubna and Nadeem. I don't know how they found out, but the three made birthday cards with whatever they could lay their hands on. Mrs. Zaman went a step further and baked a cake for me with rice flour and molasses on her kerosene stove. I was so touched. The same day, Indira Gandhi declared war after Pakistan Air Force attacked Indian air bases in Pathankot and Ambala.

The ground plan for the liberation of Bangladesh was based on four major axes of advance. On the east side, the Indian IV Corps with three divisions along with 'K' and 'S' Forces would secure the eastern part of Bangladesh up to the banks of Meghna inclusive of Chittagong. The Indian XXXIII Corps with two divisions would secure the northern region up to the western banks of the Jamuna/Brahmaputra north of the Padma. Two divisions of the Indian II Corps would clear southwestern region all the way to the banks of the Padma. A composite division along with 'Z' force would clear the northeastern part of the country. The plan did not envisage the liberation of Dacca. Instead, the planners felt that if the major river and sea ports on the southern coast of Bangladesh were secured quickly, all withdrawal routes of evacuation would be cut off and then Dacca would fall. The *Mukti Bahini* would assist the Indian army and conduct harassing operations behind the enemy lines. The Indian Air Force was tasked to establish complete air superiority in Bangladesh within the first forty-eight hours of hostilities. A naval task force with India's lone aircraft carrier, *Vikrant*, with its full complement of other ships established a naval blockade in the Bay of Bengal covering the coast of Bangladesh.

The newly created Bangladesh Air Force, with its two helicopters and lone fixed wing aircraft was tasked to destroy the fuel dumps in Chittagong, Narayanganj and Khulna.

The ground offensive started on December 4. Except for a few places, most Pakistani positions gave up without a fight. With the help of the *Mukti Bahini*, the advancing columns were able to bypass most Pakistani strong points and get behind the enemy to continue with their advance. Whenever the Pakistanis found that they were cut off, they gave up. The brigade garrisons of Jessore and Comilla evacuated and surrendered respectively without a fight. A fierce tank battle raged in Hilli of Dinajpur district where the Pakistanis fought doggedly. The Indians dropped a parachute brigade in Tangail for the final showdown in Dacca. By December 14, the Indians were at Mirpur Bridge in the outskirts of Dacca. India had earlier accorded diplomatic recognition to Bangladesh on December 6.

The Nixon Administration was hell bent on saving Pakistan from breaking up; it saw the situation in Bangladesh as a cold war conflict where the Soviet Union was India's ally and by extension a patron of Bangladesh. Although many democrats in the US Congress and Senate were sympathetic to the Bangladesh cause because of the humanitarian tragedy<sup>49</sup> the Administration hawks, Nixon, Kissinger, and Haig, would leave no stone unturned to stop the liberation of Bangladesh, if for no other reason but only to stop the Soviets in their tracks. For the first time in its tenure, the Nixon Administration used the hotline to communicate with Moscow. The communiqué stated that Washington may act unilaterally to intervene in the conflict to save Pakistan from breaking up. Moscow responded by simply stating that India had no territorial ambitions in the west<sup>50</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> Edward Kennedy in his speech to the Senate on December 8 differed from the Nixon Administration's position and laid out the background of the Bangladesh Struggle. He stated that war in Bangladesh did not start with the commencement of open hostilities between India and Pakistan. War started on March 25, when Pakistan launched its genocide on the people of Bangladesh and for the past nine months this war has been raging when the Administration did nothing to stop the human tragedy. His speech was critical of the misleading statements of the Nixon Administration. See Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

The Americans were also trying their hardest to get the Chinese into the fray on Pakistan's behalf. China assembled its 53<sup>rd</sup> Independent Division along the Tibet border and several other units were also deployed along the Sino Indian border. The winter was not severe and the Himalayan mountain passes were open in the first week of December. In reality, the Chinese deployment was actually a show of force rather than a real threat for the Indians for two reasons. First, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) was going through a shake up after its leader Lin Biao was killed in a plane crash while trying to escape to the Soviet Union following an abortive coup. Getting the PLA involved in an armed conflict was too risky for the Chinese leadership. The second reason was that the Soviets had deployed ground and air forces along the Sinkiang border and had their missile forces target several Chinese targets. The Soviet Ambassador in Delhi assured the Indian Government not to worry about the Chinese; if the Chinese entered the fray, the Soviets would mount a diversionary attack<sup>51</sup>.

Under the guise of evacuating its citizens, the Nixon Administration dispatched a task force from the US 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet with the USS Enterprise complemented with necessary support ships, warplanes, helicopters and ground forces to the Bay of Bengal on December 9. When the fleet reached the Strait of Malacca, its voyage was halted for more than twenty four hours when it was discovered that the Soviet Pacific Fleet was positioned five hundred miles off the coast of Ceylon. The Soviet Fleet was augmented with more ships and was heading towards the Bay of Bengal. Eventually, the 7<sup>th</sup> Fleet task force did not come near the Bangladesh coast<sup>52</sup>.

The Indian Foreign Minister, Swaran Singh arrived in New York on December 10 to participate in the Security Council debates

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> In a television interview, Admiral Vladamir Kruglyakov, the Commander of the Soviet Pacific Fleet, stated that a British Naval Task Force led by the aircraft carrier Eagle was heading for the western coast of India on December 13. The presence of the Soviet fleet stopped the advance. The Soviet Commander stated that he even intercepted communication between the British and American Commanders where the British Commander expressed concern that his force arrived too late and were in the sights of the Soviet Fleet. See Rakesh Krishnan Simha, "1971 War: How Russia sank Nixon's Gunboat Diplomacy," *Russia & India Report*, December 20, 2011, New Delhi.

at the UN. Earlier, the Soviet Union had vetoed four proposals tabled by the US and its allies for a cease fire. The Soviets had privately instructed the Indians to complete their operations in Bangladesh by the end of December. They would not be able to veto the Polish proposal in the Security Council which stipulated a peaceful handover of power to the elected representatives of Bangladesh and the release of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The handover of power, however, would be preceded by a cease fire and any UN intervention would give Pakistan the lifeline it urgently needed. Swaran Singh understood the stakes and gave a long speech that lasted two days, so that allied ground forces in Bangladesh could finish the job at hand by forcing the Pakistanis to surrender.

Getting back to Sector 7, my combat duties were reduced following my injury. I mainly stayed in the defense. After India declared war on Pakistan, Jahangir sent me on patrol to Gomastapur and link up with Bazlu and Rafiq. I was to convey Jahangir's instructions to them; their location was outside the walkie-talkie range and we did not have any communication with them. The two were to advance along the Gomastapur-Chapai Nawabganj axis and take up a defensive position outside the enemy's mortar range. After that, I was to fall back to Argararhat and wait for orders; my company remained in the main defense in Sona Masjid. In Argararhat, there was not a whole lot to do except listen to the radio and follow the progress of war. All India Radio was transmitting Manekshaw's message for the Pakistani troops in Bangladesh to surrender. The Pakistanis were not only getting a thrashing in Bangladesh, they were being routed in the western front as well. So much for their invincibility!

On December 11, I heard that the enemy had left Dhobra and fallen back to Chapai Nawabganj. I didn't want to wait any more and decided to join my company. I was unable to contact Jahangir on the walkie-talkie, so I left Argararhat without orders. Normally, I would have walked back, but that day I commandeered a tractor from the agriculture office in Gomastapur and rode on it to the northern banks of Mahananda River, the town of Chapai Nawabganj was on the southern bank. When I saw the town, I felt elated. From the time I joined Sector 7, our goal was to liberate Chapai and now it was just across the river.

When I met Jahangir, he was frantically trying to get things organized. He had arrived there earlier that morning with his company and mine. Jahangir was adamant about dislodging the Pakistanis from Chapai. The town was a sub-divisional headquarters and a built-up area. There were many inhabitants inside and fighting could inflict considerable collateral damage. The Pakistanis had two companies of 32 Punjab, a wing (battalion) of EPCAF and several units of *Razakars* defending the town<sup>53</sup>. That's more than a thousand men. They did not have any artillery, although they had 81mm/3-inch mortars.

Attacking Chapai posed quite a few challenges. First, the river was a major obstacle; it was more than 100 meters wide and the depth exceeded 4-5 meters. We could not cross it under hostile fire. Getting across with all our troops was going to be a major operation in itself. Second, fighting in a built up area had its own challenges; we did not have rocket launchers, although we did have our anti-tank grenades. Normally, our soldiers carried two hand grenades on them, but fighting inside the town would require more. At the same time, they could not carry too many that would interfere with their movement. We could improvise shaped charges with plastic explosives, but we did not have sufficient explosives and detonators<sup>54</sup> and we had never trained on charging entrenched positions with shaped charges. As Jahangir and I considered all these, it became clear that we needed to get all the grenades we could find for our men. The tractor I had commandeered could be used for bringing the battle supplies, but we did not have the trailer which was in Gomastapur. Jahangir deputed an NCO to get the trailer and bring additional grenades and mortar ammunition from Sona Masjid.

From the time we arrived on the bank of Mahananda, the enemy was pounding us with mortars and firing their automatic weapons intermittently across the river. This was just harassing fire; they weren't aiming at anything and their mortars did not

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<sup>53</sup> 32 Punjab was the unit that carried out the massacre in Dacca on the night of March 25/26. The battalion headquarters were also in Chapai.

<sup>54</sup> A shaped charge is an explosive charge used for a specific purpose. To neutralize entrenched positions, a pole charge can be used which is simply an explosive charge at the end of a pole.

seem to target any particular area. Our men were also firing back and our mortars were targeting the EPCAF lines. We couldn't afford to expend too much ammunition, we'd need it for the impending attack on the town but it was difficult to restrain our men. It was also difficult to keep them out in any form of deployment. If a mortar shell landed on their location, they'd move to another location. The best thing would be to dig in but we did not have sufficient number of digging tools. We managed to get some from neighboring villages and many villagers volunteered to help us dig in spite of mortar shells landing all around.

That evening Jahangir and I discussed our next course of action. Jahangir wanted to launch the attack at dawn on December 14. Bazlu and Rafiq were on the eastern side of the town. Attacking from that side would be expensive in terms of casualties because of the strong enemy positions along the EPCAF perimeter. Our attack would have to be launched either from the western side or the southern side along the Chapai Nawabganj-Rajshahi axis. Gyas' troops were somewhere along the Chapai Nawabganj-Rajshahi road and we needed to coordinate with him before our attack. Jahangir wanted to cross the river and reconnoiter enemy positions from the western and southern side. If possible, he would try to link up with Gyas. While Jahangir was out on patrol, my task was to complete the preparations for the attack, making sure everyone had sufficient grenades and the people carrying anti-tank grenade rifles were properly positioned along the assault line. I was also told to send a runner to Bazlu and Rafiq asking them to launch a diversionary attack on the EPCAF lines at dawn. Arrangements for the river crossing would also have to be fine tuned so that we didn't have unnecessary delays at the crossing site.

Jahangir left for the reconnaissance mission early in the morning of December 13. Shortly afterwards, Awal Chowdhury arrived with his company<sup>55</sup>. He was supposed to man the defense on the northern bank when we launched the attack on the town. The BSF battery had moved to a new gun position and could take on any target inside the town and beyond to support our attack.

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<sup>55</sup> Awal Chowdhury was in the Sector Headquarters ever since we joined Sector 7. This was his first combat assignment.

This time, there was no need for us to control artillery fire. The BSF forward observation officer would be with us, but he did not want to cross the river with assaulting troops; he would remain on the northern bank and was given a walkie-talkie to communicate with us.

Colonel Zaman arrived on the northern bank around ten in the morning. I met him at the mortar position. Naila was with him; she had insisted on seeing the battle front. They were in the mortar position for less than five minutes when a shell landed twenty meters away. Immediately, the Sector Commander sent his daughter back. This was no place for visitors; a battle was raging. I told him what Jahangir and I had discussed the previous evening. After hearing our plan, Colonel Zaman felt that the town might fall without a fight, but he did not categorically express his opinion against the impending attack. He then inspected our positions along the river bank. At one point, he even fired a few shots at the general direction of Chapai from his AK-47; this was the only time when he actually fired his weapon. He left around mid-afternoon.

As soon as he left, I checked our preparations for the attack. The Sub-sector senior JCO assured me that all arrangements were complete. I did not ask for details. My experience of the past two months told me that the JCOs and NCOs always took care of the logistical details. They needn't be told much except what was expected; they always managed to deliver. Around dusk, a runner from Jahangir's patrol arrived with a chit. He had made contact with Gyas whose force had taken up a blocking position astride the road and railway tracks to Rajshahi. If the enemy tried to breakaway they would have to fight through this position.

By now, the strength of our companies exceeded two hundred, we both had eight platoons. Jahangir had chosen the crossing site, about two miles west, and also arranged guides. Several guerilla groups including Shahjahan's had joined us. We arrived at the crossing site around midnight. I did not see any boats. Right then a group of villagers bundled in their shawls and carrying oars arrived. In the dark of the night, they got down in the cold water and began lifting boats from the bottom of the river. In no time, about 8-10 boats were ready to ferry us across. Some of the boats were quite large and could accommodate twenty to thirty. Within



an hour the attacking force, more than five hundred men, were on the other side.

People were tired and hungry. As soon as we got to the assembly area, a large mango orchard on the west side of town, village folks appeared with *chal bhaja* (roasted dry rice) and water at that ungodly hour. It could not have been easy for them to organize food for five hundred people, even if each of us only got a fistful. That, washed down with water causes the rice to swell in your stomach and you are not hungry any more.

I found Jahangir in a cowshed, resting on a *khatia*<sup>56</sup>. He was using his map case, almost the size of a bed sheet, as a blanket. He seemed relaxed. "Come, we have some time; get as much rest as you can," he said when he saw me. I piled in, my head beside his legs and his likewise, facing each other so that we could talk. The map case covered both of us. The *chal bhaja* was in the middle as we munched on it and made small talk; nothing about the war or the impending attack. We talked about our families; the prospect of seeing them soon brought us joy. The Pakistanis would surrender any day now and our country would be free. What a horrendous time the past year had been. We both wondered what our lives would be in a liberated Bangladesh.

Dawn was approaching and we got our men ready for the assault. My company was on the right towards the Rajshahi road and Jahangir was on the left; on his left was the river. Many of our men were from Chapai Nawabganj sub-division. They were excited about liberating 'their town'. It was very cold and foggy. Visibility was restricted. We couldn't see beyond a few yards; the winding roads restricted our vision even further. From the past two days, our mortars and the BSF artillery pounded enemy positions along the river bank and in the EPCAF lines. We knew this would be a costly fight.

We broke cover and the attack started as Jahangir gave the code word on the walkie-talkie. Bazlu and Rafiq also received their code word to launch the diversionary attack. The first rays of sunlight appeared over the town in the eastern horizon. Initially, we progressed rapidly and got to the edge of town. The line of

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<sup>56</sup> Rope bed with a wooden frame.

enemy bunkers was less than thirty meters away. We could see the occupants; they were firing at us vigorously. All the bunkers were connected with deep communication trenches. The enemy could go from one bunker to the next without exposing themselves. Our men were behind whatever cover they could find; one couldn't raise one's head or get out in the open. Nevertheless, we were making progress bit by bit. Suddenly, I saw Shahjahan, the professor guerilla leader, falling back; he was bleeding profusely from an arm.

I was just in front of the corner bunker that was the pivot of the enemy's defensive perimeter. Neutralizing this position would give us access to the enemy's rear on the southern side. I called for anti-tank grenades. A man with a SLR with anti-tank grenade launcher appeared by my side. He fired two; both missed and hit a building behind the bunker. We were bogged down because the enemy's automatic fire covered everything. I was watching this bunker intensely and realized that the bunker's fire bays created a dead zone where the enemy could not see or fire; it was like a small corridor less than three feet wide. I was not the only one to see the dead zone; Lal Mohammad a.k.a. Lalu had seen it as well. All of a sudden, he jumped up, an armed grenade in one hand and with the other he was firing his SLR like a pistol from the waist level, as he charged the bunker screaming, "Sisterf..., sons of swine! *Toder aiz khaiya falamu*"<sup>57</sup>! It was a sight to behold. Then, he got on top of the bunker and threw his grenade through the fire bay. The grenade went off and the bunker was silenced, its occupants dead or dying. The moment that happened another fellow ran in grabbed the carrying handle of the Chinese LMG that was protruding out of the bunker and pulled the weapon out! That prompted everyone to rush and get into the communication trenches, 5-6 feet deep and 3 feet wide. We charged through the communication trenches lobbing grenades inside bunkers along the way. Those who came out of their bunkers were shot.

After Lalu cleared that first bunker, the enemy's entrenched and fortified positions began to fall like a house of cards<sup>58</sup>. In less

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<sup>57</sup> The English equivalent would be 'I am going to eat you up today'!

<sup>58</sup> Lal Mohammad did not receive any gallantry award for his courageous action that day. His gallantry was at great personal risk, over and above the call of duty and in the face of the enemy. Thus, he satisfied all criteria for a gallantry award.

than an hour, we cleared all the bunkers on the western perimeter. The enemy also had positions on roof tops and inside buildings. I saw a sniper firing at us from the window of a one storey building barely twenty meters away. There were several occupants in that building. The door from verandah was open; the jokers forgot to shut it when they went in. I lobbed a grenade; it bounced on the verandah and went inside the room through the door. *Boom!* I lobbed another one and the same result. No one was firing at us from that building any more.

The enemy had rooftop positions from where they were sniping and pouring LMG fire on us. By then we were running out of grenades, the most important weapon for this type of engagement. I had six at the outset and then I saw I had none. Except for the two that I had lobbed into the one storey building, I had no recollection where I had used the others. Running out of grenades would bring us disaster. I checked with the men around me. Most had run out of grenades. If I had to plan this operation all over again, I would have to have a continuous supply of grenades for the entire duration of battle. Every man would have had an allotment of at least 10 grenades. It was around 11:00, and I was thinking about how to replenish grenades when Nawsher, the MFC, who was with Jahangir, came on the walkie-talkie. "Tiger is dead!"<sup>59</sup> he said.

I was stunned. In hindsight, we can say many things, expound many theories but when adrenaline is high, people are not thinking much, you just rush and do things instinctively. A LMG from a rooftop was firing at Jahangir's men and preventing his company from advancing. Jahangir broke cover, got close to the building and lobbed a grenade to neutralize the LMG position when a sniper from another building shot him through the left eye<sup>60</sup>. Just one shot. Lalu took as much risk as Jahangir, if not more and yet, he survived the war. It was all fate.

I was frantically calling the rear for grenades; there were none; only people in Awal's company had some. With our grenades exhausted and our commander fallen, we had lost the impetus. We

<sup>59</sup> Tiger is the appointment code for commander.

<sup>60</sup> Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir was posthumously conferred with *Bir Shreshtho*, the highest award for gallantry

could not dislodge the enemy with small arms fire. People started to fall back. We had to literally scramble to hold the assault line at the edge of town. Our men were too tired even to retrieve the dead. "Sir, it is winter, the bodies would be okay, we'll get them later," a fellow told me. With the lull in fighting everyone was hungry and seemed impatient. After dusk, we received our *chapati-dal* sandwich.

In the morning, Dr. Montu arrived with grenades. Not too many, but everyone got two. Dr. Montu volunteered to command Jahangir's company and go at it again, but the men were not interested<sup>61</sup>. The Pakistanis could surrender any time and people saw no sense in any more fighting. The Pakistanis did not re-occupy the area we had cleared the previous day. They were holding on to the EPCAF lines. We went to recover the bodies from the previous day's battle and Dr. Montu recovered Jahangir's body; we had lost more than thirty men. The bodies were sent back to the rear. Jahangir was buried at Sona Masjid beside Major Najmul Haq and the others were buried in the cemetery beside the field hospital.

That night we could hear the enemy trucks revving up and leaving, but we could not engage them from our position. Bazlu and Rafiq could give chase. I called Bazlu on the walkie-talkie. He cut me short and told me to listen to the radio. The Pakistanis would surrender any minute; Eastern Command had established contact with Niazi and the terms of the surrender were being negotiated. Then I thought that Gyas had a blocking position on the Rajshahi road; he would get them. Gyas' blocking position did not block anything and the Pakistanis withdrew to Natore.

On the morning of December 16, we entered the town. People rushed out of their homes to greet and hug us, many had tears in their eyes. For the past 4 days, the townspeople had been trapped inside their homes and somehow survived the shelling and firing as the battle of Chapai Nawabganj raged. They brought us garlands, sweets and whatever food they could lay their hands on. The gratitude of a grateful nation was visible everywhere. Bangladesh was finally free.

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<sup>61</sup> Dr. Montu had once commanded Jahangir's company when Jahangir was wounded in the first battle of Argararhat and hospitalized. This was before I had joined the Sub-sector.

I met Bazlu and Rafiq at the EPCAF lines. Awal crossed the Mahananda with his company and joined us. He had served in Chapai Nawabganj earlier when he was in the EPR and knew the layout of the camp. He volunteered to take over the logistical responsibilities. The men had only one meal a day for the past few days and there were some who had only one fistful of *chal bhaja*. They were hungry and had to be fed. Awal got to work and by late afternoon we had rice, mutton curry and dal; it tasted so good. I have no idea how Awal organized all that in such a short time and I did not ask.

After failing to pull off their coup on the Provisional Government, Khandakar Mushtaque was effectively deposed from the post of Foreign Minister as was his Foreign Secretary, Mahbub Alam Chashi. They had tried to form a confederation with Pakistan without the authorization and knowledge of the Provisional Government. The duo did not give up till the last minute. On December 13, when the Pakistanis were about to surrender, Chashi took a document of unilateral cease fire for the Acting President's signature. Syed Nazrul Islam obviously did not sign the document and informed the prime minister about it. Chashi's proposal was: if Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was released for the purpose of reaching a political settlement then the *Mukti Bahini* would unilaterally initiate a cease fire without informing our allies<sup>62</sup>.

Gyas joined us at the EPCAF officers mess later that afternoon. We were glued to the radio. All India Radio finally announced that Niazi had signed the instrument of surrender. We broke out with cries of *Joy Bangla* as the *Mukti Bahini* boys fired their weapons in the air in joy.

The accommodations in the EPCAF mess were good and one of the bathrooms had a water heater. I hadn't used such facilities since the time I left home. My batman, former *Razakar*, Bilal, brought my personal belongings; two pairs of trousers, 2-3 shirts and a sweater. They were washed. I took a hot shower and got into clean clothes; it felt good.

After dusk, Gyas said, he would be going to Rajshahi, about twenty miles away, and wanted Bazlu and me to accompany him.

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<sup>62</sup> Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara* '71, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

We drove in a convoy of three vehicles and reached Rajshahi after ten at night. The first place we visited was the Deputy Commissioner's (DC) residence. He received us warmly and offered us refreshments. However, he seemed nervous and wanted to clarify if he was still the DC of Rajshahi. Gyas told him that it was for the Government of Bangladesh to decide. Till such time a new DC was posted, he should continue with his office. Gyas however told him that the vice chancellor of Rajshahi University, a big collaborator and patron of *Al-Badr*, had to be arrested immediately and sent to prison. The DC called the Superintendent of Police (SP). A short while later, the SP called back and reported that the vice chancellor was behind bars.

We stayed at the circuit house that night; the DC made the necessary arrangements. Bazlu and I shared a room. The facilities were most agreeable; clean sheets, comforters and running hot water; what more could we ask. However, I could not sleep. Every time I closed my eyes I saw Jahangir. He was smiling at me. Jahangir, who escaped from Pakistan, gave up all creature comforts, lived the life of an ascetic, fought so hard for a free Bangladesh only to miss the liberation of Bangladesh by two days. Life was not fair!

That was the war for me. The task I performed as a second lieutenant in the battle of Chapai Nawabganj was the job of a major, with 10-12 years of experience. I could only do what I did because the Indians trained us well. We couldn't have received a better training for the job we had to accomplish. If we were trained in the pristine environment of a military academy such as Dehradun, we would have probably been complete misfits for the *Mukti Bahini*. Murtee was exactly what we faced when we came out. For me it had been a jam-packed two months; I survived seven attacks and may not have survived the eighth. In the end, we accomplished what Khaled Mosharraf had told us in May; everything in Bangladesh was hostile to the Pakistanis. Pakistanis who wrote books later tell us that by October the Pakistani Army didn't want to go out. They were scared of everything in Bangladesh. Their will to fight was gone. They only wanted to survive and go home. That, I think is the greatest tribute to the *Mukti Bahini*.

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## Bittersweet Victory

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I tossed and turned throughout the night. All kinds of thoughts clouded my mind. The past year had wrecked havoc in every Bengali's life. Ten million had crossed over to India. Many were killed, raped and maimed. The nightmare had finally ended. Had I not seen the violence and brutality firsthand, I would have had a hard time believing that men could commit such atrocities on other human beings.

I had no news of my family for a long time. The last information I had about them was from my cousin, Kajal in London. That was a couple of months ago, halfway through my training in Murtee. The Pakistan Army went on a killing frenzy in the last days of the war; reports about the killing of intellectuals in Dacca were coming in although details were still sketchy. I was worried about my father. I wanted to go to Dacca as early as possible and wondered when that would happen. The trunk call lines were dead and it would be a few days before they would be restored. There was no way to contact Dacca. I was homesick.

Lying in bed, I could hear birds chirping. It was still dark but I decided to get up and step out in the verandah. This was the first morning in liberated Bangladesh and I wanted to see how my country looked before the cacophony of people and everything else got in the way. A thick morning mist hung in the air. Everything seemed quiet and peaceful as the first rays of sunlight appeared. No one would be able to discern the human catastrophe this land and its inhabitants had endured in the past nine months. The early risers were going about their life in a slow wintry pace;

there were no signs of despair, panic or agony in the air. Two sentries were at the gate; bundled up in their blankets. They saw me and one of them brought me a mug of hot tea; they had kept themselves warm through the night with the hot beverage.

A little later, a convoy of 2-3 trucks pulled up in front of the circuit house. Rafiq was in one. He saw me on the verandah and came up. He told me that after we left Chapai Nawabganj, the men started to march towards Rajshahi. Except Awal and his company, everybody was coming; that's more than a thousand men. They had marched through the night and were expected in Rajshahi around noon. Rafiq had commandeered the trucks and moved the cook houses and rations so that the men could have something to eat on arrival. After consulting Gyas, it was decided that we would occupy Zoha Hall of Rajshahi University; the Pakistan Army had used Zoha Hall as their garrison in Rajshahi. The campus was outside the city on the Rajshahi-Natore highway.

We needed transportation for the men. Rafiq knew Rajshahi well; he had been a student of Rajshahi University. He knew some businessmen who owned trucks, but did not know how to contact them. So, he set out to organize transportation. Eventually, he found some trucks that picked up the men from outskirts of the city and dropped them at the university campus.

People started gathering in front of the Circuit House from early morning of December 17. Somehow, the word had gotten around that the *Mukti Bahini* were in the Circuit House. Many guerilla groups from surrounding areas also converged on Rajshahi; they began assembling at the circuit house compound. I did not know most of them. We directed all of them to Zoha Hall. The guerilla groups wanted to do a victory parade through the city but we couldn't have any victory celebration before our men arrived. So, the parade was scheduled for the next day, December 18. It would give the men a chance to rest after their long march.

On the night of December 17, a senior police officer (most probably the Additional Superintendent of Police) wanted me to accompany him and see a particular *Bihari* neighborhood near *Upshohor*. I asked him why and he said that I would not understand unless I saw the situation myself. I did not trust the police officer; he had served the occupation army for nine months and only God knew what trick he may pull on me. So, I took a



platoon with me, just in case. When I reached the *Bihari* area, all I could see was a large slum of poor people. The *Bihari* poor looked like the Bengali poor; similar dwellings and similar lives. There were no men; they had gone into hiding fearing retribution. I understood what could happen if we let things remain as they were. I asked the police officer what we could do in this situation. He said that they would be safer in protective custody. We spoke to the elders in the crowd and told them that we'd have to move them to the jail for their protection; they understood and seemed relieved. The same night the *Bihari* women and children were moved to Rajshahi Jail.

For Bazlur Rashid, visiting his parents and family in Naogaon was more important than any victory parade. Naogaon was less than thirty miles from Rajshahi and he couldn't wait any longer. His feelings were understandable. He hadn't seen his family from the time he left for PMA in 1970. For the past one year, he had no information about them. If his folks were alright, he would be back the next day.

Similar victory parades were held in other places. In Dacca and elsewhere, innocent bystanders were injured by stray bullets when exuberant freedom fighters fired their weapons in the air in celebration. We did not want such accidents in Rajshahi. It was therefore decided that our men would not carry weapons. But that created new concerns; we had not cleared the city of collaborators and many *Razakars* and *Al-Badr* had gone underground. They could get bold and attack our parade, especially if we were not armed. Finally, it was resolved that we would have two armed platoons, one in front and the other in the rear of the column, under two able JCOs to protect us.

The parade started from Rajshahi University and ended in *Boro Maidan* near the Circuit House. As the column passed through the city, people from all walks of life irrespective of age or gender thronged both sides of the street to cheer us. The crowd became larger and larger as we got to the center of the city. They brought garlands, sweets and *pithas* for their warriors; they were hugging us. There was joy all around; the terror of the Pakistan Army had finally come to an end. The relief was visible in everyone. In the crowd, I saw one of my former teachers from my school days, Mr. Murshed Ali. He taught us Bengali and was a Tagore scholar.

After leaving Residential Model School, he joined the faculty of Rajshahi Teacher's Training College. He was thrilled to see me and wanted me to visit him and meet his family (which I did a few days later). The parade ended around noon.

Brigadier Pannu, Commander, 81 Mountain Brigade arrived in Rajshahi the following day on his way to Natore. I had met Pannu a couple of times in Mohidipur and he was quite fond of me; he called me 'son'. He was riding a Jeep Wagoneer of the Pakistan Army which he seemed to be enjoying greatly. Pannu wanted Gyas and me to accompany him to Natore. This sounded like a good idea; all prisoners from the Pakistani 16 Division were in Natore. On December 15, the GOC of 16 Division, Nazar Hussain Shah was ambushed and captured by one of our guerilla groups led by a student, Hamidul Hossain (Tareq)<sup>1</sup>. The Pakistani major general was handed over to the Indian Army.

On our way to Natore, we saw Pakistani prisoners in the rail station; they were being loaded in box cars for their onward journey to India. On arrival in Natore, we went straight to the Dighapati Palace. The Pakistanis were using the palace as field headquarters in the last days of the war and now the Indian Army was occupying it. As soon as we entered, we found some Pakistani army officers loitering in the palace compound. I objected immediately why the prisoners were being allowed more privileges than what was stipulated in the Geneva Convention. Pannu took note. In the main foyer of the palace, a portrait of Jinnah was hanging on the wall. I politely asked Pannu why was Jinnah's portrait still on the wall? If a portrait were to be hung, it should be the portrait of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. Pannu understood and ordered that the picture be brought down immediately. He wanted to give it to me as a souvenir, but I told him I had no use for it except to use it as a target. Pannu said maybe that's what we should do with it. He had several young Indian officers go outside with me to shoot at the picture with our side arms. The same afternoon all Pakistani senior officers who were staying in the palace were moved to POW pens.

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<sup>1</sup> Hamidul Hossain Tareq was awarded the *Bir Bikram* and joined the army after liberation and retired as a Lieutenant Colonel.

Over the next 2/3 days, all the sub-sector camps of Sector 7 moved inside Bangladesh. Sub-sectors 1 and 2 assembled at the Bogra stadium. Sub-sectors 3 and 4 moved into Zoha Hall in Rajshahi and Sub-sector 5 assembled in Pabna<sup>2</sup>. The Sector Headquarters also moved to Rajshahi. The field hospital with all its personnel arrived in Rajshahi and the patients were transferred to Rajshahi Medical College Hospital. With each passing day more fighters came to Rajshahi. We ultimately occupied three residential halls of the university. One of the provost quarters became the officers mess, another was used as family quarters where Colonel Zaman and Maqzul Chowdhury's families and widows were put up; one room for each family<sup>3</sup>. The third provost quarter was the Sector Headquarter office.

Mrs. Zaman began working with the *Biranganas*<sup>4</sup>. She was collecting as much information about them as she could; the number of women affected in each district, their physical ailments as well as their psychological profiles. Rehabilitating them into society was not going to be easy and would require a long time. Many of the women were pregnant. No one knew what would happen to the newborns. These issues were now coming to the forefront. Whenever the Sector Commander visited *Mukti Bahini* Camps in other districts, Mrs. Zaman would accompany him so that she could work on this issue. The first district they visited was Pabna. I saw this as an opportunity to contact my family through Samson Chowdhury. He was in the pharmaceutical business and a friend of my father. His residence was in the same compound as his factory and most people in Pabna knew where Square Pharmaceutical was. I requested Mrs. Zaman to contact him and tell him about me. Immediately after reaching Pabna, Mrs. Zaman contacted Mr. Chowdhury and he in turn sent a messenger to my father the same day. A few days later, the same messenger brought me a message from my father. I was relieved to learn that every one in my family was alive and well.

<sup>2</sup> As mentioned above, we had a company in Chapai. Similarly, we also had some elements in Sirajganj in Pabna District.

<sup>3</sup> One of the widows was Mrs. Nizam, wife of Captain Nizam. He was in the EPR and was killed in the resistance phase of the war.

<sup>4</sup> *Biranganas* means 'brave women' in Bengali. This term was used to describe rape victims. These women not only had physical problems; many were psychologically scarred for life.

Reports of looting by *Mujib Bahini* members were trickling in from all over the sector. These men who were inactive during the liberation war were now showing their true colors. In Bogra, a large group of *Mujib Bahini* began looting the main market straight away after liberation. The locals took the matter to Captain Idris who immediately went to the market and had it surrounded. When the looters saw Idris and his men most of them ran away, although Idris managed to arrest about a dozen of them. Idris wanted to make an example out of these fellows. As soon as he reached his camp, delegation after delegation of Awami League leaders went to Idris to obtain their release; Idris would not budge. Eventually, Osmany called Idris and ordered him to release them. Idris was really upset and told Osmany that if he had anything to say he should talk to the Sector Commander and not him. After much haggling, the looters of the *Mujib Bahini* were released on Osmany's orders.

In Rajshahi, a lady doctor of the Rajshahi Medical College came to the Sector Headquarter one morning and wanted to speak to the senior officer present. Gyas dealt with the matter. She seemed harried and petrified. A *Mujib Bahini* Leader was threatening her with severe consequences if she did not yield to his demands. She wanted us to help her. When Gyas spoke to the perpetrator, the individual tried to say that she was a collaborator. Gyas reminded him that the Government of Bangladesh had instructed the *Mukti Bahini* not take the law in their hands and the same must apply to the *Mujib Bahini* as well. If there were any allegations against her, it should be reported and if need be she could even be arrested but he must stop harassing her and making demands on her. The man got the message and as far as I know he did not bother the lady doctor any more.

A few days later, we received more complaints against the same man and his cronies. He was extorting protection money from shop owners and businessmen. One of our physicians, Dr. Emdad, who was from Rajshahi, had firsthand information about the misdeeds of this individual and his group<sup>5</sup>. He was giving the freedom fighters a bad name. One evening, I was ordered to pick him up from his hideout in Kachramor. I took a platoon and had

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<sup>5</sup> Dr. Emdad worked in Lalgola.

the hideout surrounded. I entered the hideout with a few men with our weapons cocked and I told him that I had orders to take him to the Sector Headquarters in Zoha Hall; he could come with me quietly and if he resisted, I was prepared to use force. The place was surrounded; he could look outside and see for himself. He understood and came with me meekly<sup>6</sup>.

Mr. Badiuzaman a.k.a. Tunu Bhai, a businessman and a native of Rajshahi, worked as the logistics officer in Sub-sector 4 (Lalgola). His older brother, Mr. Salam was a prominent Awami Leaguer of Rajshahi. Four members of Salam's family were killed by the Pakistan Army. The eldest son was an engineering student in Dacca and was killed when the Pakistan Army cracked down in the last week of March. Another son, an intermediate student, and a brother were picked up from the family residence in Rajshahi and shot because some non-Bengalis identified them as '*Mukti* sympathizers'. A brother-in-law (sister's husband) was also killed after being picked up from home. We visited Mr. Salam's home, to express our sympathies. Tunu Bhai introduced us to his brother and sister-in-law. They were educated and cultured middle class people who had nothing to celebrate; their grief was overwhelming. How do you express sympathy to a family who had lost so many family members? We sat with Mr. and Mrs. Salam in silence; they bore blank expressions. As I watched them, I wondered how many families in Bangladesh were in this predicament. Many in my company had lost family members, had their womenfolk violated and their houses burnt. What kind of a homecoming would they have? They were poor people who did not even have any savings; how will they get their lives in order?

News of the intellectuals' massacre began to trickle in. The details were ghastly. This grisly act was committed by the *Al-Badr* which was formed by the student wing of the Jammāt-e-Islami. Major General Rao Farman Ali, the military advisor to the Governor of East Pakistan, prepared the list of people who would be picked up and murdered<sup>7</sup>. Among the victims was Professor

<sup>6</sup> The fellow was eventually handed over to the Awami League leadership in Rajshahi.

<sup>7</sup> A list was found in Rao Farman Ali's diary. Everyone in that list was picked up and then taken to Rayer Bazar blindfolded with their hands tied behind their backs. They were herded into a ditch and shot on December 14. The victims included university professors, physicians, journalists, writers and leading professionals.

Munier Chowdhury of Dhaka University. Professor Chowdhury was a leading Bengali playwright. His writings dealt with Muslim Bengali nationalism in the State of Pakistan. He was a mild mannered man and a popular professor much loved by his students. He was my mother's cousin and Bhashon's father<sup>8</sup>. Bhashon's relationship with his father was extremely friendly and now he was gone. How would they cope with this loss? What was his fault? He was one of those people who never hurt anyone; he had an independent mind that did not conform to the ideas of the ruling Pakistani clique and that was his fault. Bhashon had two younger brothers; the youngest hadn't yet started school. Bhashon would have to take responsibility of his mother and brothers now; the thought scared me.

There was more bad news. Mozzammel Haq who was working as the Sector Logistics officer had received a message from Dacca that in the last days of the war, four of his brothers and a brother-in-law who were freedom fighters were killed in action as the *Mukti Bahini* and Indian Army were entering Dacca. Two of the brothers were married and had small children. Understandably, Mozzammel was shattered. We tried to console him but what could we say to make him feel better?

Every day, family members of *Mukti Bahini* personnel would come to Zoha Hall trying to get information about their loved ones. If the individual was an army, EPR or a policeman we could eventually get details and trace their whereabouts. But if they were *Gono Bahini* volunteers, there was no way to trace them if they were not from Sector 7. Meeting these families was never easy; women and children wanted to know about their sons, brothers, husbands and fathers and we could not help them. The *Mukti Bahini* or the provisional government had not set up any system of tracing combatants or individuals. The best we could do was to provide them with free room and board for a couple of days. We did not even have funds to provide them with the return fare, let alone financial assistance. I could not help but wonder if this was how Bangladesh would treat the kith and kin of its bravest sons?

The Sector Commander was going to visit Bogra and Sirajganj and he wanted me to accompany him. As we drove, we could see

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<sup>8</sup> See Chapter Three for details.

the destruction the war had caused. Many villages were razed to the ground; all one could see were the burnt out stumps of trees and the raised earthen plinths where homes once stood. The fields were barren; no crops, nothing. The war had transformed Bangladesh into a massive dust bowl. Almost every bridge was demolished; the Indian Army Corps of Engineers were repairing them one at a time. Because it was winter, many of the rivers and canals were dry and the Indians created diversions wherever possible. The bulk of the repair work on bridges had to be completed before the monsoon. Otherwise, there would be massive communication problems. Bringing the country to the pre-war state was not going to be an easy task for the new administration.

In Sirajganj, we met several *Mukti Bahini* groups; they were quite disorganized. There seemed to be problems in the chain of command; no one wanted to subordinate themselves to another member of the *Gono Bahini*. Colonel Zaman spoke to them and wanted to move them to either Rajshahi or Bogra. Initially, there was quite a bit of resistance because their homes were around Sirajganj. The Sector Commander eventually succeeded in convincing them. In Bogra, I was pleased to see my course mates Kaiser, Amin and Saifullah. I hadn't met them since I left Tarangapur with my company.

On December 16, the Provisional Government brought out an order outlining the immediate tasks of the field administration; matters that should receive priority in bringing life back to normal in the country (Annexure E). The order did not mention anything about the role of Indian Administrative Service or Indian Police Service officers in Bangladesh. Yet, a large contingent of such officers came to Bangladesh with the Indian Army and in some places the Indian Army tried to set them up without success. When challenged, they were unable to show any order either from the Government of India or the Government of Bangladesh outlining their role or responsibilities. This suggests that the scheme did not have political approval and this initiative must have been because of the institutional inertia of the Indian civil and military bureaucracy.

One of the battalions of 81 Mountain Brigade was stationed in Rajshahi, although they were frequently rotated. At one point, 1/8

Guards was in Rajshahi. The commanding officer was a Bengali and a fellow cadet of the Sector Commander from their Indian Military Academy days<sup>9</sup>. The Indian Colonel was thrilled to meet Colonel Zaman and renew their old acquaintance. He invited all the sector officers of Sector 7 to a dinner at the battalion's field mess; they brought their silver and other trophies for the occasion and the officers were attired in their field dining kit (uniform with regimental cummerbund). We wore whatever we had. It was a nice event; cocktails followed by dinner.

In the dinner, I met an Indian Administrative Service Officer and an officer of the Indian Police Service. They were hoping to take over as the DC and SP of Rajshahi, but were unable to do so because of non-cooperation of the Bangladeshi staff. These officers were seeking the Sector Commander's help. Colonel Zaman told them that Bangladesh was an independent country; only citizens of Bangladesh could hold offices of the Bangladesh Government, not Indians. He could not therefore, help them.

The Sector Commander wanted to return the invitation. In addition to the officers of the 1/8 Guards, he invited Prem Singh and officers of the Charlie Sector, and the Commander and staff officers of 81 Mountain Brigade. I was given the responsibility of organizing the dinner. Our mess did not have the capability to host such an event. I tapped into the DC's resources and the dinner was held in the Circuit House. The DC's Nazir was able to arrange the food and the service, but alas he could not arrange any drinks. I requested the drinks from the DQ<sup>10</sup> of 81 Mountain Brigade and he arranged what we needed<sup>11</sup>. Mrs. Zaman joined the men in the dinner. It was a great event; we spent most of the evening telling war stories in a merry state.

In addition to being a company commander, I was appointed as Sector Adjutant. This meant that I had now become the sector post office; passing instructions down and conveying problems up, talking to people throughout the day. Everyone wanted to go home and see their families. The Sector Commander decided that

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<sup>9</sup> They were from different courses.

<sup>10</sup> DQ is the abbreviation for Deputy Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General (DAA&QMG). In a brigade headquarter, he is the staff officer responsible for personnel and logistical matters.

<sup>11</sup> We paid for the drinks.



half of the men could be sent on fifteen days leave and once they returned, the other half could go. No one wanted to go home without money and they received their allowances before going on leave. When the time came to rejoin many overstayed; this was understandable and the Sector Commander viewed these transgressions liberally. Every day, I would receive all kinds of petitions. I did not know what to do with them. If the petition was not addressed to me, I wrote "Recommended" and signed it with my seal<sup>12</sup>. I never found out whether my recommendation made any difference to the petitioner's plight.

The situation in the country was fluid and it could easily go out of hand. Although, the pro-Pakistani elements that had collaborated had gone underground, these elements would try to take advantage of any situation that could weaken the government of the day. They could even start a fractious armed conflict between different groups including pro-liberation forces; after all, there was no dearth of weapons in people's hands. The provincial government machinery in Dacca had served the Pakistanis for the past nine months mostly under duress. However, some of these officials served the Pakistani cause enthusiastically and collaborated actively in the perpetuation of crimes against the people of Bangladesh. They had to be screened and removed before they destroyed the evidence of their complicity. In order for that to happen, the provisional government had to take its seat in Dacca as early as possible. Following the surrender, the provisional government had issued several instructions and orders that very few people knew about, let alone act on them.

On December 22, the war time cabinet arrived in Dacca. One of the first things that the Provisional Government did was to make official its decision to form the National Militia with the fighters of the *Gono Bahini*. The document on National Militia was signed by the Acting President, Syed Nazrul Islam (Annexure F)<sup>13</sup>. The idea behind the National Militia was explained by Colonel Zaman as: "Those who destroyed the bridge would now rebuild it". On December 26, the Government brought out an announcement

<sup>12</sup> Almost no petition was addressed to the adjutant.

<sup>13</sup> The document outlined the monthly operating budget for the militia which was under 6.7 million rupees.

under the signature of the prime minister where it felicitated the *Mukti Bahini* (regulars and *Gono Bahini*) for their patriotism, courage, valor and sacrifice during the liberation war (Annexure G). Notable in the prime minister's announcement was that he did not mention any other force for felicitation including the *Mujib Bahini*. This was not an omission, but a considered statement because it was only the *Mukti Bahini* that actually fought the Pakistanis<sup>14</sup>. The Prime Minister's announcement also outlined the salient features about the formation of the National Militia. Again, on December 31, Tajuddin Ahmed elaborated on the Acting President's National Militia order by outlining the composition of the National Militia Board (Annexure H). The board had representation of all pro-liberation forces including representatives of the *Mukti Bahini*, Indian Army and the left parties<sup>15</sup>. The first board meeting took place on January 6, 1972, with Tajuddin Ahmed in the chair (Annexure I).

The Bangladesh Forces Headquarters scheduled a Sector Commanders Conference in Dacca on December 29/30. Colonel Zaman was going to Dacca for the meeting and his family would accompany him. I saw this as my opportunity and requested the colonel to take me along; he agreed. We all piled into the Sector Commander's jeep and started for Dacca on the night of December 27. We drove through the night and reached Nagarbari *ghat* at dawn. Ferry services had not yet started and we had no way to get our jeep across the mighty Jumana River. The jetty in Nagarbari did not have a ferry that we could use. The solution that we came up with was to improvise a ferry using a *Bojra*<sup>16</sup>. We modified the deck by covering it with a bamboo platform so that it had a flat

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<sup>14</sup> This contrasts with the contemporary loose definition of 'freedom fighter' where anyone who sang or read the news in *Shahdhin Bangla Betar* or worked in a refugee camp or performed some other task from a desk, is described as 'freedom fighter'. Tajuddin Ahmed's announcement did not call them freedom fighters. Official records of the *Mukti Bahini* show that the total strength of the *Mukti Bahini* (regulars and *Gono Bahini*) was around 85,000 and yet the liberation war ministry has issued more than 500,000 freedom fighter certificates. Who are these extra 400,000 freedom fighters? It's not hard to guess. Also, to be taken into account is the fact that most regulars did not take any freedom fighter certificate, because the list of regulars who fought in the liberation war appeared in the *Bangladesh Gazette*.

<sup>15</sup> Pro-Chinese left political parties did not support the liberation war.

<sup>16</sup> *Bojra* is a large country boat of East Bengal.

surface where the jeep could roll in. The bamboo platform would have to be constructed. We also needed to dig a ramp in the river bank so that the jeep could be driven into our improvised ferry. This was not going to be easy; we had a lot of work to do.

The people of the area were helpful. The villagers helped us with the lashing and other modifications that the boat needed. Another group was making the bamboo platform and yet another group was digging the ramp. I was supervising the work when out of nowhere a group of young men had us surrounded with their rifles pointed at us, ordering us to put up our hands. This surprised me completely and I reluctantly put up my hands in the air just as the others had done. This group thought that we were Pakistanis, trying to escape since our jeep did not have a Bangladesh flag. We told them who we were and Colonel Zaman knew their leader; we were still in Sector 7 territory. The moment the young men learnt that Colonel Zaman was the Sector Commander their attitude changed and they told us the reason for their suspicion. It never occurred to us that our jeep had to have a Bangladesh flag. The incident was a blessing in disguise as the young freedom fighters mobilized more people for the task at hand.

After a while their leader appeared. He was helpful and he even brought us some food. By now, the rigging and the construction of the bamboo platform was almost complete. Our ferry did not have any engine; six oarsmen would have to row all the way to Aricha. God knows how long that would take. As we discussed the river crossing with the guerilla leader, he told us that he could find us a small speed boat which I could use to go to Aricha. Once I reached Aricha, I could go to the Police Station which was now a *Mukti Bahini* Camp and have them help me in commandeering a motor launch; several motor launches were berthed at Aricha *ghat*. The motor launch could then be used to tow our ferry. One of his men would accompany me and he could also bring the motor launch to our ferry. Accordingly, I set off in the speed boat. It took me less than an hour to reach Aricha. When I introduced myself to the freedom fighters in the Police Station, they received me cordially and were eager to help. They found me a suitable launch with a crew and fuel and in no time it was on its way to give the Sector Commander a tow.

We were close to Dacca; I would meet my loved ones in a few hours. The anticipation and joy coupled with the experience of the past few months made me reflective. Life was not going to be the same again. The war had turned everybody's life upside down; so much death and destruction. Now, we have to pick whatever pieces of our past life remained and move on. Many personal and familial relations would be redefined in the coming days. The Bengalis who collaborated with the enemy in the massacre of their brethren were despicable. Will we ostracize them? Time would tell.

How did we force the Pakistan Army to surrender in nine months? Whatever may be the myth of the Pakistan army, it was not a formidable enemy. It was a Third World army and its senior commanders were inept<sup>17</sup>. Terrorizing unarmed civilians of your country with guns is neither an act of courage or sacrifice, nor an appropriate response to a political crisis. The mere fact that no Pakistani military officer in East Pakistan refused to carry out unlawful orders to kill unarmed civilians en masse or conduct systematic rape, explicitly prohibited by the Geneva Convention and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights is the clearest indication that the Pakistan Army was not professional. In East Pakistan, it had deteriorated into a collection of thugs that thrived on murder, loot and rape. Such an army could not accomplish its mission.

Yahya and his associates also read the international scenario incorrectly. They seemed to have put too much hope on their cold war alliances; SEATO and CENTO buttressed further by the Chinese initiative brokered by Pakistan<sup>18</sup>. The Nixon Administration did all it could to help Pakistan by proclaiming that the events in East

<sup>17</sup> The memoirs of senior Pakistani military officers illustrate how removed they were from the realities on the ground. In his book, Lieutenant General, A. A. K. Niazi, *The Betrayal of East Pakistan*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1998; resorts to lies and fantasies to cover up his personal incompetence as well as those of his peers. Similar descriptions are found in the statements of other senior military officers. See Muntasir Mamoon, *Pakistani General der Mon: Bangali Bangladesh Mukti-judho*; Dhaka: Shomoy Prokashon, 2010. Major General, Khadim Hussain Raja, *A Stranger in My Own Country, 1968-1971*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2012, states that he never understood why the Bengalis did not like West Pakistanis. If the commander of the only Pakistani division in East Pakistan failed to understand what Bengali aspirations were, Pakistan was doomed to breakup.

<sup>18</sup> SEATO and CENTO stand for Southeast Asian Treaty Organization and Central Treaty Organization respectively.

Pakistan were the internal affairs of Pakistan. This was an untenable position totally devoid of compassion for the human tragedy of genocide and mass rapes. It had no moral ground on which its support could be explained to the American people<sup>19</sup>. Besides, 1972 was a presidential election year and Nixon could not afford to get the U. S. military (that depended on conscripts) involved in another Asian conflict before the end of the Vietnam War.

The Awami League had no preparedness to conduct an armed struggle/guerilla war against the Pakistan military<sup>20</sup>. In March, when Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, Yahya and Bhutto were holding the futile talks that were only a ruse to complete the troop build up, the Awami League rebuffed all efforts by Bengali military personnel to organize resistance. There was almost a naïve expectation that Bengali soldiers would automatically revolt and resist the Pakistan Army in an organized manner. Even if that were to happen, actions would have to be planned and coordinated. The lack of planning and coordination cost the lives of many Bengali soldiers at the East Bengal Regimental Centre, and in the 1 and 3 battalions of the East Bengal Regiment as well as the lives of EPR men in Peelkhana and policemen in Rajarbagh. The only preparation that the Awami League had taken was to send Chittaranjan Sutar to Calcutta for liaising with the Indians. What Sutar accomplished in Calcutta is not easy to assess, but the facts show that even after Mujib had called to organize a fortress in every home on March 7, there was no contact between Sutar and the Awami League high ups<sup>21</sup>. The fact that Tajuddin Ahmed and the BSF could not find him in Calcutta, only illustrates the lack of planning and preparedness to put into effect the call for “building a fortress in every home”.

<sup>19</sup> Archer Blood, *The Cruel Birth of Bangladesh*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2002. As US Consul General in Dacca, Blood had sent a memorandum of dissent on Ambassador Farland's assessment. The Consul General's assessment matched the reports the independent international newspeople were filing.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapters Two and Three for details.

<sup>21</sup> A. K. Khandakar, Mueeedul Hasan, and S. R. Mirza, *Muktijuddher Purbapar: Kathopokathon*, Dhaka: Prothoma Prokashon, 2009, report that a youth delegation from the Awami League visited Calcutta in March to liaise with Sutar. What they discussed or coordinated is not known but subsequent events suggest that their visit only informed RAW about the situation in East Pakistan. There was no agreement on how to conduct the liberation struggle.

What would have been our fate without Indian help? Without the Indian assistance, it is doubtful that the Pakistanis would have surrendered in nine months. India provided us with the essential ingredients to bring a revolutionary guerilla war to a successful conclusion. She gave sanctuary, training, weapons, and logistics for the *Mukti Bahini*. Most importantly, the Indian Army fought the conventional phase of the guerilla war to rout the enemy once they were weakened and dispersed without giving them the opportunity to reorganize<sup>22</sup>. The Indian help was not entirely out of altruistic reasons. With an independent Bangladesh, India would have a friendly neighbor on its eastern borders as opposed to a hostile one. It would also put an end to the clandestine support the Pakistan Military was giving to secessionist movements in Nagaland and Mizoram. This in turn, would discourage other secessionist movements in India. Thus, the creation of Bangladesh was of strategic importance to India. Finally, the breakaway of the eastern province proved that Jinnah's two nation theory was wrong; religion was not a sufficient foundation for the creation of a nation; shared ideals and aspirations, language and culture were. There was also the potential of huge economic benefits for India since Bangladesh would create a burgeoning market for Indian goods and services.

Throughout the liberation war, the Awami League was burdened with petty political issues. In the absence of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, no leader commanded the kind of respect and allegiance that he had. Awami Leaguers, who opposed the provisional government, couched their position in such a manner so as to give the impression that it would benefit the great leader himself<sup>23</sup>. The majority of leaders were unwilling to make the sacrifices that were expected of them. Everything was ad-hoc. Had Tajuddin Ahmed not taken over the responsibility of the

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<sup>22</sup> Pakistan tried its outmost to have a UN mandated cease fire to resolve the Bangladesh crisis. The Soviet Union which had inked a treaty of friendship with India vetoed this proposal four times.

<sup>23</sup> For instance, Khandakar Mushtaque conspired with the Americans to form a confederation with Pakistan and give up the liberation struggle in exchange of Sheikh Mujib's freedom. As if that was a sufficient mitigating factor. It never occurred to him that people of Bangladesh wanted independence and had spilled a lot of blood for the cause. It was not a negotiable issue and demand for independence would not be given up even if it meant obtaining Sheikh Mujib's release as a tradeoff.

government what could have happened is difficult to conjecture. In spite of the opposition from the youth leaders, Tajuddin derived his authority through a democratic process; he challenged and debated the youth leaders in the Awami League Council. He did not conspire to eliminate those who opposed him although his opponents had put out a contract on his life<sup>24</sup>. Tajuddin kept his focus on the issue at hand without being bogged down emotionally or politically. Most importantly, his personal relationship with Indira Gandhi and senior members of her staff went a long way in overcoming difficult issues between the two countries.

The *Mukti Bahini* was a rag tag army with limited capabilities; there were glaring shortcomings in terms of deficiencies in weaponry, limited skills and inexperienced leadership. With so many weaknesses, how did we succeed? The *Mukti Bahini* succeeded because of the support of the ordinary people of Bangladesh and the dogged determination of its fighters<sup>25</sup>. By December, the *Mukti Bahini* was about a hundred thousand strong; out of which four to five thousand were regular Bengali soldiers who revolted and deserted the Pakistan Army; another seven to eight thousand were former EPR men. The rest were volunteers. University and college students had played a pivotal role in various anti-government movements in Pakistan. They were, however, reluctant to undertake roles that would put them in harm's way during the liberation war; they were the 'intellectuals'. My estimate is that no more than three to four thousand college and university students joined the *Mukti Bahini*<sup>26</sup>. Fewer actually fought. Most of the sacrifice and fighting was done by the sons of poor rural farmers of Bangladesh. These boys remained dedicated throughout. On many occasions, they took huge risks by putting

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter Four for details.

<sup>25</sup> Siddiq Salik, *Witness to Surrender*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1977, for a description of how young *Mukti Bahini* fighters behaved when they were captured by the Pakistan Army. Even after prolonged torture, the young fighters seldom passed any essential operational or tactical information to the enemy or led them to hideouts. Instead, they remained unwavering in their determination for the liberation of their homeland. Even before their death, they scoffed at the Pakistanis by saying that it was a privilege to have their blood spilled on the sacred soil of Bangladesh.

<sup>26</sup> The estimate is based on the numbers of Sector 7. We had interviewed all *Gono Bahini* members of the sector as preparatory work for the National Militia. The number of college and university students in our sector was about 300-400. Extrapolating this number across all sectors gives a number around 3,000-4,000.

their lives on the line and willingly made sacrifices for their country<sup>27</sup>. They also bore the brunt of atrocities of the Pakistanis; whenever Pakistan army found out that an individual from a certain household joined the *Mukti Bahini*, their homes were burnt and their family members targeted. The rural people not only fought; they provided most of the assistance the *Mukti Bahini* needed. They gave the *Mukti Bahini* shelter, acted as guides and informants at great personal risk, helped in digging trenches and crossing obstacles, provided food and water to the hungry fighters when they did not have enough for their families and even showed the traps and mines laid by the Pakistan Army. It was ordinary people who were the true heroes of the liberation war. They did all this without the expectation of any reward, except the liberation of their homeland.

Returning to my story, I left the Police Station and stepped outside for some fresh air. As I was strolling around, I saw a large pond with large trees lining its bank. The pond had a concrete *ghat* so that people could use it with ease. I sat down under a tree on the far bank opposite to the *ghat* and watched the idyllic scene of a Bengali village. It was typical; people going about their chores of daily life. Men and women came in groups. Some filled their pitchers; others washed their children, bathed and did their laundry.

The Jamuna could be seen from the banks of the pond. The river looked majestic. All kinds of country boats were plying on it. Some boats had their colorful square sails up and were cruising leisurely. In the distance, I could see fishermen in their boats. They had finished their day's work and were getting ready to return home. Sometime late in the afternoon, a young woman came to the pond all by herself. She saw me on the far bank, but it did not bother her. She went about her business in a slow and deliberate pace. She did her laundry and washed her hair carefully; enjoying every minute of her bathing ritual. Then, she started swimming splashing water all over; she was enjoying herself. As I watched her, I felt this is what freedom must mean; a woman's freedom to enjoy a bath all by herself without worrying about predators.

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<sup>27</sup> See Chapter Three for the discussion of the early fighters of the *Mukti Bahini* who took on the Pakistan Army armed with only grenades and one pistol per group.



Someone from the police station came and informed me that the Sector Commander's ferry was in sight; I should proceed to the landing site. The jeep disembarked without any problem. We thanked the boatmen and the young freedom fighter who accompanied me. After a brief visit to the police station, we were on our way to Dacca. The bridge in Toraghat was closed for repairs and a ferry was getting vehicles across. After the ferry crossing, everyone's mood became upbeat. Naila and Lubna started singing; sometimes Nadeem and I would join in.

We crossed Savar and could soon see the lights of Dacca; our hometown. For the last nine months, Dacca was a killing field; its inhabitants witness to one of the biggest and most gruesome genocides in history and yet the city looked stoic and brave; beat up but not beaten. Around eight in the evening, we were in Dhanmondi at Colonel Zaman's younger brother's house. The Zamans got off and I was on my way to my maternal grandfather's house in Central Road. My family had moved out of our Testuri Bazar home a couple of months ago, because the Pakistan Army came looking for my father; someone in the neighborhood had snitched that I had joined the *Mukti Bahini*.

I knocked on the door with a myriad of emotions. One of my uncles opened the door and screamed "Dipu!" In a flash, all the residents of the house were at the entrance<sup>28</sup>. Everyone was hugging and kissing me. The joy in my parents' faces was visible; I was alive, well and had returned home! What more could they ask? Indeed, there was a lot to be grateful about. In the pandemonium, one of my younger cousins, a child of three or four, panicked because I had my arms around my mother and started to cry loudly. He thought that I was one of the bad guys that he had heard about in past few months and I was going to harm his aunt, my mother!

As we settled down for the evening, everyone wanted to do something special for me; hot water for a bath, a clean change of clothes, something special I would like to eat and what not. All this was quite overwhelming. Everyone wanted to hear war stories,

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<sup>28</sup> In addition to our family, two of my aunts and their families had taken refuge in my grandfather's home. The house was teeming with people.

but I was more interested in listening to what happened in Dacca when I was away. I heard the grisly details of how Bhashon's father was picked up from his home and taken to his death. There was more news of death at the hands of the Pakistan Army in the extended family<sup>29</sup>. As the Pakistani military was going to the racecourse to surrender, some Pakistani soldiers fired on civilians because the Bengali population on the roadside jeered at them; their appetite for killing unarmed Bengali civilians had not subsided till the end. Almost everyone in Dacca had seen the aerial combat between the Pakistani Sabres and Indian warplanes (MIG 21s, SU 7s and Gnats). Exciting for the entrapped civilian population was seeing Pakistani fighter jets being shot down from the sky.

My mother could not wait to get back to her home; she had had enough of the refugee life and now that I was home, it was time to get back to normality, if it were at all possible. The next day she had our Testuri Bazar home cleaned. The following day, the family left my grandfather's house and returned home.

My first full day in Dacca was spent meeting the extended family. All day long, people dropped by bringing me home made delicacies, as if to make up for what I had missed all this time. Almost everyone had similar stories of life in a city under siege. For the residents of Dacca, fear, real or imagined, had ruled everyone's life. During the nine months, the non-Bengali population had acquired a new found arrogance in their dealings with Bengalis. Small *Bihari* tradesmen who did repairs and other odd jobs behaved rudely with their Bengali employers. There was trouble all around. Through Peace Committees, the army and its agents penetrated most neighborhoods of the city. One would need a non-Bengali or a Muslim Leaguer or a *Jammati* for mediation with the army. Even the non-Bengali peons began intimidating their Bengali superiors in almost every place of work. The *Pirs* of Dacca did a roaring business because of their assumed closeness to the Pakistan Army and the Islamic political parties<sup>30</sup>. If someone got

<sup>29</sup> The husband of my aunt's younger sister was Lieutenant Colonel Golam Quader who was on deputation to a corporation in Chittagong when he was picked from his home and murdered. A cousin, Shamsuzzaman, a telecommunication engineer in Chittagong was picked up from his office. He was never seen or heard from again.

<sup>30</sup> Jahanara Imam, *Of Blood and Fire*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1990.

into difficulty with the army or if a family member was arrested, other family members ran to the *Pir* for God's blessings and favor. The *Pir* milked the family as long as he could. Although the *Pir* promised reprieve, in reality, it made no difference to the victim's plight.

Sometime in the afternoon, I visited Alam's house. His home had become a *Mukti Bahini* Camp of sorts. In August, the house was raided by the Pakistan Army. They unearthed a large cache of weapons in the premises. Alam's mother was the only person at home at the time. After this incident, his father and sisters had crossed the border and joined the *Mukti Bahini* field hospital at Bisramghar. The house was crowded with members of Dacca Platoon who were now calling themselves the 'Crack Platoon'. All my friends from Motinagar were there; Zia, Fattah, Aziz, Anu, Maya and many others. While at Alam's, I heard the term 'sixteen division' for the first time. I did not know what it meant. Someone explained it to me. These were people who became freedom fighters on the sixteenth of December, the day the Pakistan Army surrendered. These individuals picked up weapons abandoned by the Pakistan Army or *Razakars* and were masquerading as freedom Fighters. Almost every neighborhood in Dacca had sixteen division elements and these people were trying to take control of their locality. They were giving the *Mukti Bahini* a bad name. Alam added that most of the armed young men in Dacca were 'sixteen division'; only a few were genuine freedom fighters.

At Alam's, I also found out how Rumi, Bodi, Jewel and Azad were captured by the Pakistan Army. After attacking a military vehicle in the streets of Dacca, the group got involved in a running battle with the Pakistanis where the freedom fighters were firing at a military jeep from a moving Fiat. They managed to make their escape. The following day, Bodi went to his friend Farid's house. Farid's father, Jalaluddin Ahmed was the principal of Dacca College and a patron of the NSF, the pro-Pakistani student party created by the erstwhile Governor of East Pakistan, Monem Khan. He lived in the Principal's residence in campus. While Bodi was in Farid's room playing cards with friends, Farid stepped outside for a short while. When he returned, he had a Pakistan Army officer with him and he gave Bodi up. After Bodi's arrest, the same night the army conducted several raids and picked up Rumi, Azad and

Jewel. Kazi Bhai was also in the same hideout sleeping. When the soldiers woke him up pointing an AK 47 at him, Kazi snatched the weapon from the soldier setting off a few rounds in the scuffle and shot his way out killing some Pakistanis. In the scuffle, his *lungi* had fallen off and he ran out stark naked. He was not caught. After the surrender of the Pakistan Army, Farid escaped adversity because he had familial connections with Awami League high ups and they were protecting him in spite of the fact that he was directly responsible for the death of several freedom fighters<sup>31</sup>.

Prominent collaborators who brought unprecedented misery to the Bengali population had all gone underground. They were being helped by their friends and relatives although most did not approve of what they did. Some simply left their locality or town and assumed new identities to hide their record of collaboration. A few even left the country. The situation was too fluid and I had the feeling that the collaborators somehow knew that they would have to lie low for a while. With time, they would resurface; after all they had sympathetic ears with the politically powerful.

The Indian Army established several check posts in the city. They were trying to recover illegal weapons and hijacked cars. Their approach was soft and I did not see any high handedness. My vehicle was stopped several times and I found the Indian soldiers courteous and polite.

I visited 2 East Bengal to meet my course mates. The battalion had established camp in the Naval Recruitment Center in Eskaton, which was quite close to Alam's home. I met Salim and Sayeed there. They were wearing uniforms. Little did I know that this would be the last time I would see Salim. He was killed in a clearing operation in Mirpur a few weeks later. From them I learnt that Mizan and Didar had come to Dacca on leave from their unit in Chittagong.

While in 2 East Bengal I heard about the martyrdom of my course mate Khandakar Azizul Islam in the battle of Chandrapur in Kasba on November 22<sup>32</sup>. The attack was planned by the Indian 11 Mountain Brigade. Before the assault, the divisional artillery

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<sup>31</sup> His sister was Ivy Rahman and his brother-in-law, Zillur Rahman, ensured that nothing happened to Farid. Rahman became the president of the republic in 2009.

<sup>32</sup> Aziz was awarded *Bir Bikram* posthumously.

softened the objective. The attack was launched by a composite battalion force made up of 2 companies of 9 East Bengal and 2 companies of 19 Punjab of the Indian Army. Aziz was one of the company commanders of 9 East Bengal; the other being Lieutenant Harunur Rashid<sup>33</sup>. It was a frontal attack and the casualties were substantial; Aziz was killed in action as was one of the Indian company commanders, Major Kule. Aziz was a happy go lucky type of a person who always sported a smile during training. He was physically strong and a good runner.

Mizan, Didar and I, went to see Jahanara Imam, Shafi Imam's (Rumi) mother. Rumi was a good friend and we were together in the stadium on March 1 when the protests against the Yahya regime began. Rumi was arrested from his home in Elephant Road after the operation mentioned above. His father and younger brother were also picked up but were released later. A few weeks before the end of the war, Rumi's father died of a heart attack caused by the stress of having his boy in Pakistani custody. Jahanara Imam was happy to see us. In her characteristic manner, she offered us refreshments. She was putting up a brave face; but her grief was visible. It seemed as though she was oscillating between extreme anguish and the joy of victory; the boys were coming back home and she was expecting her son any day. She did not believe that Rumi would not return; no one had seen his dead body. She was inconsolable.

The same day I went to see Mr. and Mrs. Azizus Samad, Samad Bhai's parents. It was a very sad meeting. Both his parents were older than my parents and they were not in good health. They were overwhelmed with grief. As we spoke, both were continually wiping their tears; they barely spoke. Samad Bhai was a good student and an outgoing person. His parents were proud of their son and they had great expectations for him. The war had extinguished his life in its prime. I felt their pain, but what could I do to lessen it?

The following day around lunch time, I went to the venue of the Sector Commander's conference at Minto Road. The meeting had ended. Everyone seemed to be in a jovial mood;

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<sup>33</sup> Lieutenant General Harunur Rashid became the Chief of Army Staff before retirement.

congratulating each other on their hard earned victory. Colonel Zaman introduced me to the other Sector Commanders and the Commander-in-Chief. Except Khademul Bashar and Khaled Mosharraf, I had never met the others. Notably missing was Colonel Taher; he was still in an Indian Army Hospital recovering from his battle injuries. He lost a leg to hostile shelling. Khaled Mosharraf was also hospitalized after receiving a splinter injury in his forehead. He had a long hospital stay and was discharged only a few days ago. He was at the meeting. There was a visible depression on his forehead. It was reassuring to see that he was not paralyzed and his faculties seemed perfect. He had made a significant impression on me in the early days of the liberation war. Meeting Khademul Bashar was a joy; he was popular among the Murtee officers. As we were leaving the meeting, the Sector Commander told me that once we go back to the sector, we would have to work on the National Militia project in earnest.

That evening, I had my first encounter with a 'sixteen division' contingent in Testuri Bazar. This group wanted to park a hijacked car in a neighbor's compound, but the neighbor would not let them. This led to a loud argument and a crowd had gathered; no one would dare tell the young men anything. Finally, I stepped in and convinced them to take their hijacked car elsewhere; they were not happy. A little later, when I was coming home after dropping an aunt, I was met by a group of people at the mouth of our lane. A young man was bleeding after being hit by a stray bullet. I drove the boy and his father to the emergency in Dacca Medical College Hospital.

The next couple of days, I visited friends and relatives all over Dacca. I was impressed to see that work had started on the reconstruction of the Saheed Minar; February 21 was just around the corner. One day, Sheikh Kamal came by our home around lunch time. He had lunch with us, much to my mother's delight.

I would visit Alam's house everyday because it had become a meeting place for freedom fighters. Once, an acquaintance whom I first met in Motinagar requested me for a ride to Gulshan and I obliged. We stopped in front of a large house. As I was about to drive off, he said that it would only take him a few minutes and requested me to come in. Without giving too much thought, I went

in. The house was inhabited by a well to do non-Bengali family and I was surprised that he brought me there. While he was talking to the lady of the house, the fellow told me that I could pick up anything I liked; I was shocked and told him that I did not need anything. After he finished his business, on our way back, I asked him what the deal was. After much persuasion, he coyly responded that he was taking protection money from the family; many Chhatra League members were doing it and some *Mukti Bahini* boys had also gotten into the act. I was so outraged that I asked him to get off my (father's) car.

Our visit to Dacca ended on January 2. For me and my family, the visit was too short; we wanted more time together. Ferry service had resumed and my parents decided to visit Rajshahi with the whole family. They were going to start in a couple of days. The Zaman kids stayed back. Mrs. Zaman was coming along as was Major Salauddin Amin, a retired officer of the East Bengal Regiment and a close friend of Colonel Zaman. His eldest son, Chinku, a friend of ours, was missing since the early days of the war. In addition to visiting *Mukti Bahini* camps and battlefields in our sector, Amin was trying to find information about his son. The following day, he accompanied me to Chapai and I explained to him the battle of Chapai Nawabganj on the ground. He was surprised at the daring of the *Mukti Bahini* to take on a battalion plus defensive position in a built-up area with only grenades. Amin said that professional soldiers may not have undertaken this battle with only grenades because of the odds.

We started to work on the National Militia project. The government had not yet given any guideline as to what personnel information would have to be collected. We designed a form and began the process by calling each member of the *Gono Bahini* for an interview; one at a time. The members of the *Gono Bahini* were quite diverse in their backgrounds and aspirations; categorizing them for different rebuilding tasks was not easy. We began the process of documenting every individual's preference. This was a tedious and time consuming process and we worked on this for several days. It was also a rewarding exercise because we found out a lot of information about the individual members of the *Gono Bahini*; something that could not be done in any detail during the war. At

the same time, most felt that their country was giving them their due recognition and they would soon be working to rebuild their war ravaged land; they did not want much.

My family arrived in Rajshahi a few days later. The Sector Commander and my father hit it off really well; they had many common friends and acquaintances. My father also knew several professors of Rajshahi University and my parents visited them. The main purpose of my father's visit to Rajshahi was to convince me to go back to the university and resume my studies. He assured me that I did not have to go back to Dacca University. I could go anywhere in the world and he would finance me, but at that point in my life I did not want to be anywhere except Bangladesh. We just liberated our country and we were in the process of raising a new army; I wanted to be a part of that process. He discussed the issue with Colonel Zaman; the colonel advised him to allow me to make my own decisions; it wouldn't do any good to force me to return to the university if my heart was not in it.

Sometime in the first week of January, we heard from the grapevine that A. H. M. Kamaruzzaman, a native of Rajshahi and the Home Minister in the Provisional Government would be visiting Rajshahi soon. Although, we had no official word, he was supposed to come on a Sunday, the same week my family was in Rajshahi. He was coming to meet party leaders and workers; we had nothing to do with the visit. A. H. M. Kamaruzzaman was coming in an Indian Air Force helicopter which would land in the Rajshahi University campus. Around ten in the morning we heard the helicopter rotors and saw the helicopter land near the administrative building. Sunday being a holiday, many freedom fighters were strolling around and enjoying the pleasant weather. Most of the freedom fighters in our camp were from Rajshahi District and a number of them had gathered in front of the helipad to greet the minister.

As soon as the minister deplaned he was whisked away by the members of the *Mujib Bahini*; who had organized a motorcade for him. A. H. M. Kamaruzzaman did not know that the *Mukti Bahini* boys were waiting in the helipad to greet him. On his way to the city, someone informed him about the disenchantment of the *Mukti Bahini* boys. The minister understood and returned to the



helipad to greet them. By then, the boys were really upset and they began to agitate and raise slogans against the minister. The minister's return to the helipad only added fuel to the fire and situation became very tense. In the row that followed, people started to push and shove when a certain member of the *Mujib Bahini* tried to draw his pistol from his holster. As soon as he drew the pistol, the *Mukti Bahini* boys snatched it away and a scuffle broke out. The fellow who drew the pistol was beaten up badly and several *Mujib Bahini* members were seriously hurt. A. H. M. Kamaruzzaman had to flee the scene.

When the Sector Commander heard about the incident, he became very concerned. As it was, the relationship between the *Mujib Bahini* and the *Mukti Bahini* was sour. After liberation, in Sector 7, at least on two occasions, the *Mukti Bahini* had arrested members and leaders of the *Mujib Bahini* for their high handedness and looting. If the situation was not brought under control quickly, things could get out of hand. Colonel Zaman understood the ramifications. He went and saw the minister in the circuit house and invited the minister to come to Zoha Hall the following day for a durbar; he gave his personal assurance that no untoward incident would happen. The following day, the minister came to Zoha Hall and the durbar went well; it was so good that the minister returned a few weeks later and joined the *Mukti Bahini* men for lunch on Eid-ul-Azha.

The surrender of the Pakistan Army in Bangladesh caught most Pakistanis by surprise. All along the people of West Pakistan had been told that the Pakistanis were winning the war and all of a sudden about a hundred thousand Pakistani soldiers laid down their arms to save themselves. The regime, however, in its communication with its commanders had given the green light to Niazi to surrender. Yahya's rule ended disgracefully. There was even an attempt by the GOC of 6 Armored Division, Major General M. I. Karim, a Bengali, to remove Yahya through a coup in order to restore the honor of the Pakistan Army (Annexure J)<sup>34</sup>.

The history of Pakistan would have been different had Bhutto accepted the election results. His acceptance of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's right to form the government would have averted the

<sup>34</sup> Brigadier A. R. Siddiqui, *East Pakistan the Endgame*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2004.

great tragedy we suffered. Instead, the generals of the Pakistan Army had hatched a conspiracy to kill three million Bengalis to bludgeon them into submission. This was done at Bhutto's behest. Bhutto succeeded in disgracing the generals and he had also effectively neutralized all political rivals in West Pakistan. The grand stage was now set for Bhutto to grab the reins of power in Pakistan. He took over the presidency as well as post of the chief martial law administrator, with the help of generals like Gul Hasan who became the army chief<sup>35</sup>.

After taking over, Bhutto in a public meeting in Karachi sought the support of his audience to release Sheikh Mujibur Rahman; the people agreed. Mujib was then removed from Layalpur jail to a government rest house near Muree where Bhutto met him. Bhutto pleaded with Mujib not to break Pakistan; as if that was still negotiable. Mujib remained non-committal and said that he could not promise anything until he has had a chance to meet his people. Two days later, Mujib left for London for his return to Bangladesh. Bhutto saw him off at the airport and made the same plea again.

In London, Mujib stayed at the Claridge's Hotel. Anthony Mascarenhas, an old friend, met Mujib at his hotel. Mascarenhas had been writing about the Pakistan Army's genocide in the *Sunday Times* of London which were some of the earliest detailed documentation of the genocide. For the past nine months, Mujib was in solitary confinement with no contact with the outside world. He had no information on how his country was liberated. Mascarenhas describes Mujib as "a latter day Rip Van Winkle, out of touch and out of tune with the times"<sup>36</sup>. Mujib was contemplating a secret deal with Bhutto to maintain some sort of link with Pakistan. When they were alone, Mujib confided in Mascarenhas<sup>37</sup>:

*I have a big scoop for you. We are going to keep some link with Pakistan but I cannot say more till I have talked over with the others. And for God's sake don't you write anything till I tell you.*

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<sup>35</sup> Bhutto who studied at Oxford and Berkeley did not take his history seriously. If he had, he would have known that power is transient especially if army generals were his partners to acquire power.

<sup>36</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Mascarenhas was horrified and his response was:

*Are you mad?... Don't you know what happened in Bangladesh? After what the people have gone through they will lynch you in the streets of Dhaka, Bangabandhu or no Bangabandhu, if you so much as utter one word about a link.*

News of Mujib's release was received with great enthusiasm in Bangladesh; people celebrated in the streets. The Indian Air Force wanted to send an aircraft for Mujib, but he chose to use a Comet of the Royal Air Force. The choice was symbolic; Bangladesh was an independent country and not a client state of India. He made a brief stopover in Delhi for meeting the Indian Prime Minister. When he started to address the crowd in the airport in English, the audience wanted him to speak in Bengali and he switched to his native tongue. Mujib thanked Indira Gandhi, the people and Government of India for their assistance in the liberation of Bangladesh as well as for giving shelter to ten million Bangladeshi refugees. After the Delhi stopover, he was on his way to Dacca.

Bangladesh was eagerly waiting for Mujib's arrival. The event was being transmitted directly by Bangladesh Television. People started gathering at the Tejgaon Airport and on both sides of the street from early morning. His aircraft touched down in Dacca late afternoon, on January 10. The airport was teeming with people. The cabinet stood at the foot of gangway as the aircraft door opened. On the tarmac was a smartly turned out contingent of the East Bengal Regiment for the guard of honor. Thus, the first guard of honor given by the Bangladesh Army was for Bangabandhu, the father of the nation. As the crowd stood in silence in enormous anticipation, Khasru, a musclem of the Chhatra League pushed the Acting President and the Prime Minister aside, climbed the gangway and entered the aircraft with complete disregard to protocol and decency. Most of us in the *Mukti Bahini* had heard stories about the peccadilloes and indiscretions of Khasru and his associates during their stay in Calcutta. He was a symbol of the indulgent Awami youth who did not take part in a single operation against the Pakistanis and yet claimed to be a 'valiant freedom fighter'. These people did not face any hardship and were somehow above the law. As this scene unfolded, I could not help but feel that fake freedom fighters in the guise of Chhatra League were hogging the glory; a glory for which their contribution was nil.

The great leader appeared on the gangway with Khasru at his side! The crowd cheered as Mujib got down. He kissed the soil of independent Bangladesh. Then, he broke down, sobbing with joy and sorrow; joy for victory and sorrow for the great human tragedy. From the airport he rode in an open truck to his residence after addressing a huge gathering in the race course<sup>38</sup>. My friend and course mate, Sheikh Kamal was in the truck beside his father in a second lieutenant's uniform. The journey took several hours as cheering people from both sides of the road impeded the truck. He reached his home sometime late in the evening. There were thousands of people in Road 32; it took him more than an hour to go upstairs to meet family members.

Late in the evening, Tajuddin forced the crowd to vacate the premises so that the great leader could rest. Everyone including Tajuddin left. However, the ones who stayed back were Khandakar Mushtaque, the conniving foreign minister who wanted to give up the fight for independence and abandon the liberation war to form a confederation with Pakistan, and Abdur Rab Serniabat, Mujib's brother-in-law, who led the lawmakers of the Southwestern districts, in raising an unsuccessful no confidence motion against Tajuddin. The others were the youth leaders who had put up numerous roadblocks for the provisional government and the prime minister in the preceding nine months. Their leader, Sheikh Moni who had earlier tried to assassinate Tajuddin was there as were Sirajul Alam Khan, Tofayel Ahmed and Abdur Razzak. Also, present was Dr. Wazed Miah, Sheikh Mujib's son-in-law<sup>39</sup>.

Sheikh Mujib had not yet had any discussion with the provisional government cabinet or the commanders of the *Mukti Bahini*. Being a prisoner in Pakistan, Mujib had no access to newspapers or radio; whatever he knew about the liberation war was what he had heard in London and Delhi. Everyone, including

<sup>38</sup> In his speech in the Racecourse, Mujib stated that all links with Pakistan was henceforth severed.

<sup>39</sup> S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2005; Mueyedul Hasan, *Muldhara '71*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986; and M. A. Wazed Miah, *Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibkey Ghirey Kichhu Ghatana O Bangladesh*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1993.

the Indian Prime Minister, had the highest praise for the provisional government and its leaders; Syed Nazrul Islam and Tajuddin Ahmed. Mujib had no idea how the liberation war was organized and fought and how we prevailed on the Pakistanis against all odds. Before anyone directly involved with the war could brief him, these men whose role during the liberation war was questionable to say the least, if not outright seditious, were poisoning the Sheikh's ears. The tenor of their diatribe was that Tajuddin was power hungry and that is why he assumed the office of the prime minister. He was going to challenge Mujib for the leadership of the country and would like to relegate Mujib to a titular position. They told him that Tajuddin was responsible for the disgraceful infighting within the Awami League during liberation war. Nothing could be further from the truth. The youth leaders then advised Mujib on what actions were needed to be taken.

The next morning when Tajuddin came to see Mujib, he was cold; he had no interest in listening to how the liberation war was organized and fought. Karim (2005) describes Mujib's response to Tajuddin as 'glacial'. The damage was done. The chasm created by the youth leaders between Sheikh and Tajuddin would have grave consequences for the future of the newly independent country. What was tragic about this chasm was that it was not based on ideology, but on unbridled ambition of the youth leaders. In order to endear themselves to the leader their tool was sycophancy so that they become the only power brokers in the new country. A leader of Mujib's stature should have seen through the sycophantic ploy but apparently he did not. Or was it also Mujib's desire to sideline Tajuddin?

Karim (2005) describes the event:

*No man's judgment can be better than the information on which it is based. Mujib, who knew almost nothing about the "Mujibnagar" government and its inner workings, had allowed himself to be influenced by misinformation and disinformation provided by the student leaders and his brother-in-law Serniabat.*

*Mujib and Tajuddin were complete opposites in many ways. Mujib was a powerful orator and had an uncanny ability to win the trust and loyalty of the people by voicing in simple language their inner thoughts and longings. But he had practically no experience in*

*running a government. He had a brief stint as Cabinet Minister for seven months in the provincial government in the mid-fifties but he had left it to pursue his real love, organizing his party. Tajuddin was a man of different temperament and talents. He had a lively intellect and an orderly mind. He was no demagogue and he was most persuasive in smaller circles. He had a strong sense of duty and was extremely hard working.*

*The two men had got on surprisingly well together, as complete opposites often do, in the critical weeks before the crackdown.*

*Tajuddin was a forthright person, a quality which earned him the enmity of the student leaders at that time.*

*They had pressed Mujib to declare independence unilaterally in forthcoming speech on the 7<sup>th</sup> (March)<sup>40</sup>. Mujib was annoyed with their presumption that they had better answer to the question of the day than the Awami League High Command in their collective wisdom. But he was reluctant to express his disapproval directly to them. Tajuddin took it upon himself out of a sense of duty to the party, to rebuke them for their irresponsible adventurism and earned their displeasure.*

The law and order situation was the biggest problem facing the new government. If the situation was not brought under control, the country could slide into anarchy and warring factions led by various warlords would make the liberation meaningless. Even before the liberation of the country, the Provisional Government considered the issue of the trial of collaborators and took important decisions on this question (Annexure K). As it was, there were too many weapons in the hands of ordinary people. To make matters worse, Moni had instructed members of the *Mujib Bahini* not to deposit their weapons to the authorities till such time Mujib had returned home. Other groups such as the *Kaderia Bahini* led by Kader Siddiqui also took the same position<sup>41</sup>. On the other hand, weapons of the *Gono Bahini* were stored in the sector armories as is the custom in the military. They had effectively deposited their weapons to the authorities.

<sup>40</sup> Parenthesis added by author.

<sup>41</sup> Immediately, after liberation Kader Siddiqui publicly lynched some *Razakars* at the outer stadium in front of the international press much to the consternation of the *Mukti Bahini* and the government. The incident was publicized all over the world.

Tajuddin raised the issue with Mujib the day after he returned<sup>42</sup>:

*I had hoped you would ask me about how I had conducted myself during the liberation struggle under trying circumstances. But I see you are not interested. But in the greater interest of the country I should talk about one thing. Large quantities of arms are in the hands of freedom fighters right now. My requests to them to hand over those arms have been ignored<sup>43</sup>.*

Mujib's response to Tajuddin was: "Don't worry about my boys holding on to their arms. They will hand them over when I tell them to do so".

Mujib's arrival in Bangladesh brought several matters to the forefront which the provisional government had hitherto not addressed because of lack of unanimity within Awami League. With Mujib in the country, decisions on these issues could not be put aside any longer. The foremost issue was the structure and form of the government and the appointment of a full fledged cabinet. The provisional government had functioned with only four cabinet ministers and that had created considerable heartburn amongst the senior members of the Awami League, because they were left out. On the other hand, the provisional government did not create a larger cabinet because like everything else during the liberation war, it was of a size that was necessary to get the job done; no bigger.

Within the first week of Mujib's arrival, the Awami League high command met for three days to decide on the form of government. The initial press reports at that time indicated that Mujib may become the president of the republic and Tajuddin the prime minister. However, when the official decisions were made public, the meeting opted for a Westminster style parliamentary government with an unicameral parliament. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman would be the prime minister. Tajuddin was taking over as finance minister and no one was given the rank of deputy prime minister; not even Syed Nazrul Islam. Khandakar, Hasan and

<sup>42</sup> S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Tajuddin was referring to the weapons held by the *Mujib Bahini* and the other *Bahinis*.

Mirza (2009) report that Mujib wanted a presidential form of government but Tajuddin reminded him that for twenty-two years the Awami League had campaigned for a parliamentary form of government in Pakistan. Opting for something else would tantamount to a reversal of philosophy. How would this choice be viewed by the people and the world at large? Whatever may be the form of government, Mujib had to be its leader; otherwise there would be insurmountable problems. In addition to being the prime minister, Mujib retained the defense portfolio.

A couple of days after Mujib took over as Prime Minister, the Government of Bangladesh rescinded all orders and instructions relating to the National Militia<sup>44</sup>. There was no elaboration or explanation on the rationale behind this decision. The government did not even say what it was planning to do with the members of the *Gono Bahini* in the future. The rescinding order only stated that members of the *Gono Bahini* were to be demobilized after payment of their monthly allowance (fifty rupees) for the current month; no pension, nothing. The severity of the decision left most in the *Mukti Bahini* stunned; a bolt from the blue. It was difficult to comprehend why this decision was made; what actually happened; who or what drove Mujib to take this decision? Indications from subsequent events suggest that demobilizing the *Gono Bahini* was done at the behest of the *Mujib Bahini* and its leaders; they had not yet deposited their weapons and the *Gono Bahini* was in camps under the respective sectors and their weapons were in the armory<sup>45</sup>.

The Government of Bangladesh was abandoning those sons of the soil who had made the biggest sacrifice for the liberation of their country. Members of the *Gono Bahini* were the only ones who

<sup>44</sup> The rationale for not implementing the provisional government's decision on National Militia was never explained. With hindsight and after the publication of Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986, one can only guess what could have been the reason for such a decision. If Mujib had any desire of keeping a link with Pakistan, then the *Gono Bahini* could not be organized into the National Militia; they would certainly oppose any such initiative. This may also shed light on why Tajuddin had to be sidelined and Mushtaque retained in the cabinet. After all, Mushtaque had wanted a confederation with Pakistan till the last minute which Tajuddin had vehemently opposed.

<sup>45</sup> A couple of weeks later, the *Mujib Bahini* and the *Kaderia Bahini* deposited their weapons to Mujib in separate ceremonies in Dacca Stadium and Tangail respectively.



literally followed Mujib's instruction of resisting the enemy by building a fortress in every home and this was their reward for following Mujib's call for armed struggle and resisting the enemy. They fought with very little weaponry, showed determination and courage against overwhelming odds, bore the brunt of Pakistani atrocities; their homes were destroyed and many had family members killed, usually the head of their households. They had no money and many would have to take over responsibility of their families. Their survival was at stake. How would they handle this desperate situation, no one knew. They were being dumped.

The Sector Commander was devastated. How was he going to break this news to the men? Why didn't the Defense Minister (Mujib) or the C-in-C himself make this announcement; they could have easily done so before the *Gono Bahini* members of Sector 2 in Dacca. After much deliberation, the Sector Commander decided to announce the news to the men in a durbar. A veil of gloom descended on the men during the durbar. There were many questions from them all directed at the government that the Sector Commander was in no position to answer, because he did not know what the government was thinking. One university student asked if the government was justified in treating members of *Gono Bahini* as disposable freedom fighters to be thrown away after use. Another wanted to embark on a movement to force the government to reverse its decision; someone else demanded that their weapons be returned from the armory, so that they may fend for themselves. One fellow stated it most succinctly: the Sheikh Mujib Government was throwing *Gono Bahini* to the wolves for slaughter.

Colonel Zaman listened to the *Gono Bahini* members patiently. At the end of the durbar, he stated that he was like the *Gono Bahini* boys; he was a retired military officer before March '71 and like them he too was going back to civilian life, as soon as he could hand over the sector's responsibilities to someone. He had already informed Osmany about his decision. He, however, reminded everyone that at this time any movement against the government or a confrontation with *Mujib Bahini* would destabilize the country and could give the excuse to the Indian Army to prolong its stay in Bangladesh. In the worst case scenario, the country could even

plunge into a civil war and that would be a tragedy. He advised everyone to be patient and give the government a chance to sort everything out; maybe the government could do something in the future to rehabilitate the *Gono Bahini*.

To appease the *Gono Bahini*, the government decided that all members of the *Mukti Bahini* would receive a 'National Freedom Fighter Certificate'. This certificate would have the C-in-C, Osmany's, signature printed on it and the sector commander would have to sign it in person. It was a consolation prize; this certificate would be proof that one was a freedom fighter. From the inception of this certificate, there were leakages; many non-freedom fighters were able to get these certificates. This could happen only if someone in the sector was either negligent or categorically violated the criteria set to illegally benefit a friend or a relative, sometimes in exchange of money.

For the next one month or so, we processed the volunteer freedom fighters of the *Gono Bahini* out of the *Mukti Bahini*. It was a heart-wrenching experience. The educated university and college boys would return to their studies; their families were generally better off than the rural poor. For the latter, life was going to be a challenge; many did not even have a homestead to return to. On top of that, there was a distinct possibility that these people could become victims of trumped up charges by the thana police who by and large had remained loyal to the Pakistanis during the liberation war.

The Bangladesh Forces Headquarters solicited citations for gallantry awards. The Sector Commander felt that gallantry awards for a liberation war was inappropriate; no one had received any award for the American Revolutionary War. The reward for the liberation war was independence itself. Gallantry awards were for professional soldiers who show courage beyond the call of duty when two armies fight. Nevertheless, he instructed us to write citations and said that he was going to write two for officers of the sector; one for Jahangir and the other for Idris. I wrote a couple, not too many. I recommended Lal Mohammad a.k.a. Lalu for *Bir Uttam* for his role in the battle of Chapai Nawabganj. The majors of our sector got busy writing their own citations much to the displeasure of the Sector Commander which

he refused to sign on one pretext or the other<sup>46</sup>. At one point, the colonel asked me to write one for myself, but I told him that I couldn't. When the awards were announced, all sector commanders were awarded the *Bir Uttam* irrespective of whether the individual concerned actually displayed gallantry in the face of the enemy against overwhelming odds and beyond the call of duty or not.

The Sector troops were being reorganized into infantry battalions and the initial plan was to raise two infantry battalions from Sector 7 troops. Not all sectors were getting two battalions. The only other sector that was raising two battalions was Sector 6, Khademul Bashar's sector. The fact that we were going to raise two battalions out of sector troops was good news because that meant that we could recruit more *Gono Bahini* members from our sector. As we started the process, the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters changed its decision and sanctioned only one battalion for Sector 7. This meant that more *Gono Bahini* members would have to be sent home.

The Indian Army was taking away weapons and armaments surrendered by the Pakistan Army. In addition to military equipment, there were also cases of looting by Indian Army personnel<sup>47</sup>. This caused considerable consternation amongst the *Mukti Bahini*. Several sector commanders brought the matter to Osmany's attention seeking guidance on how to deal with these issues; no guidance was given. Major Jalil, Commander Sector 9, tried to stop an Indian Army group from taking away captured military equipment and industrial machinery dismantled from jute mills in Khulna. The situation got quite tense and was about to go out of hand when cooler heads prevailed. The Bangladesh Government took Jalil into custody and disgraced him publicly<sup>48</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> Similar self aggrandizement by officers happened in other sectors as well.

<sup>47</sup> J. N. Dixit, *Liberation and Beyond: Indo-Bangladesh Relations*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1999. Several Indian Army officers including officers of the general rank were court martialled for looting in Bangladesh after they returned home. Also, taking away captured equipment was not a part of the Indian Government's policy. This was done by over exuberant officers on the ground in Bangladesh. The Indian foreign ministry had even recommended to their government for returning the captured military hardware to Bangladesh. Nothing was returned.

<sup>48</sup> The Indians insisted that an example be made out of Jalil. Unlike other Sector Commanders, he was not awarded a *Bir Uttam*.

Jalil had neither amassed wealth for himself, nor did he do anything that could be construed as abuse of office. His position was based on the principle whether the Indian Army could take away military and civilian assets from Bangladesh. On the other hand, there were many cases of outright violations of the law such as collaboration, looting, murder or crimes against humanity that were being condoned by the government, if the person committing the offense was somehow related to Awami League.

A question in most freedom fighters' minds was, is justice going to be selective in independent Bangladesh?

Jalil's arrest was the last straw that broke the camel's back for the Sector Commander. He called Osmany and told him that he was going home. He had joined the liberation war as a volunteer and now that the war was over there was no reason for him to hang around. The *Gono Bahini* members were demobilized; so why not him. He had no intentions of joining the Bangladesh Army. He handed over command to Gyas and went back to civilian life.

The presence of the Indian Army in Bangladesh was causing quite a bit of heartburn. As much as we were grateful to the Indians for helping us, we did not want them to occupy our country. Whatever problems we had, we would have to solve them ourselves with our resources. The issue of the Indian Army's departure frequently came up in the newspapers. This was a difficult issue and had to be dealt with considerable sensitivity. Mujib took the bull by the horns when he visited India in February. He asked Indira Gandhi bluntly when the Indian Army would leave Bangladesh. She replied that her army would leave whenever the Bangladesh Prime Minister desired it. Then, she suggested that the departure date be set on Mujib's forthcoming birthday; March 17. And that was it; no prolonged negotiations between advisors and ministers; just two prime ministers agreeing mutually. Before they left, the Indian Army gave a guard of honor to the Bangladeshi Prime Minister at the Dacca stadium. Mujib thanked the Indian soldiers for their sacrifice, courage, and hard work for the people of Bangladesh.

This was a major milestone and it put to rest the propaganda that many pro-Pakistani elements were perpetuating at that time that the Awami League had turned Bangladesh into a client state of

India. The Indian Army had stayed in Bangladesh for only 3 months after victory, a fairly short time by any standard. By and large, their stay in Bangladesh was not tainted by high handedness; the only untoward incidents were that they took away the surrendered military hardware and some isolated cases of looting by errant individuals. Their exit was so easy because of Mujib's stature and the mutual respect and understanding that the two prime ministers had for each other. If Mujib had not returned from captivity, this evolution may not have been so smooth.

Once, I visited the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters before the three service headquarters were raised. This was Osmany's headquarters<sup>49</sup>. Khaled Mosharraf was also located here. Opposite Khaled Mosharraf's office was the office of Group Captain Tawab. He was a Bengali and an officer of the Pakistan Air Force who had been in Germany during the Liberation war and did not join the liberation forces. He conveniently joined the Bangladesh Forces after liberation. I asked Khaled Mosharraf about Tawab and he replied: "He is a Pakistani"<sup>50</sup>.

After the demobilization of the *Gono Bahini* and the departure of the Indian Army, the Bangladesh Forces were separated into three services. Colonel Safiullah took over as the new army chief, which surprised most; everyone expected Ziaur Rahman to become the chief. There was a widespread speculation that Zia was not made the army chief because he had read the announcement of independence on March 27; in the first announcement he even declared himself President. This did not go down well with Mujib although it was unlikely that he ever found out the circumstances under which Zia had made the announcement. Zia was sent off to Canada for a couple of months under the guise of attending a commonwealth conference on military uniforms. The real reason, however, was that his wife needed medical treatment; she was a Pakistani prisoner for nine months.

A group of war injured freedom fighters was being sent to East Germany for advanced medical treatment. The East German

<sup>49</sup> It was housed in the old Air Force Headquarters which is now demolished and some AMC installations occupy that land opposite to Dhaka CMH.

<sup>50</sup> Tawab's tenure was short lived and he returned to Germany after a few weeks. He again reappeared in Bangladesh after August 15, 1975 to become the Air Force Chief for three months during the reign of Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed.

government had made an unsolicited offer. It was an expression of solidarity by the Government of German Democratic Republic so that some seriously injured freedom fighters could be rehabilitated at least physically; otherwise they would remain handicapped for the rest of their lives. These were freedom fighters who needed organ reconstruction and other advanced surgery that was not possible in Bangladesh. There were thousands of such cases. Major Amin Ahmed Chowdhury was leading this group that was to consist of twenty three war injured veterans. They were traveling in a chartered aircraft; with no travel papers such as airline tickets, passports or visa. When the group boarded the aircraft there were twenty five people instead of twenty three; the two extra passengers were people with Awami connections; one had a birth deformity and the other had hurt himself in a fall; they were not freedom fighters. It occurred to no one who mattered that by including these two individuals, two deserving war injured freedom fighters were deprived of treatment.

Alas, in Bangladesh, it did not matter what you did for your country. What mattered was which powerful politician you knew.

The Bangladesh Army rescinded the order of the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters that gave commission to Saifullah and Bazlu. They would have to join the second batch of cadets who went to Murtee, but were not commissioned because the war ended before the completion of their training. These cadets would do the last leg of their training in Dacca; Saifullah and Bazlu would have to join them if they wanted a commission. Saifullah decided that he had had enough and he was going to try and go abroad for higher studies. Bazlu would join the training in Dacca.

Immediately after the formation of the new Bangladesh Army Headquarters, Captain Idris, who commanded Sub-sector 2, received a letter from the personnel directorate saying that his services were no longer required. The letter addressed Idris as 'MF' and not Captain<sup>51</sup>. Before the liberation war, Idris was commissioned in the Pakistan Army. He was court martialed after he had punched his Punjabi commanding officer who had made derogatory comments about Bengalis. Idris was a lieutenant. After leaving the Pakistan Army, Idris joined a sugar mill as a plant

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<sup>51</sup> MF stands for *Mukti Fouj*, the term used to describe regulars of liberation war.

engineer from where he joined the liberation war. During the liberation war, he was promoted to the rank of Captain by the Bangladesh Forces Headquarters, Osmany's Headquarters. After victory, he argued with Osmany because the C-in-C wanted him to release some *Mujib Bahini* men involved in looting in Bogra. Was this Osmany's way of humiliating Idris? There was no way to be certain, but what else could it be? After all, ordinary regulars of the *Mukti Bahini* did not get a letter from the Army Headquarters; an order from the Sector Headquarters would suffice. Or was this the work of non-freedom fighter army officers who after serving the Pakistan Army with loyalty during the liberation war and were now absorbed in the Bangladesh Army and were working in Army Headquarters? Idris went back to civilian life following this incident.

Over the next couple of months, we reorganized our sector into the 17 Battalion of the East Bengal Regiment. In due course, Kaiser and Amin relocated to Saidpur Cantonment from Bogra along with regular Army and ex-EPR personnel under them and joined 17 East Bengal. I made a few trips to Dacca; a combination of business and holiday. During these trips, I had to visit the newly formed Bangladesh Army Headquarters to obtain necessary authorization for getting various stores and supplies for our newly raised battalion. In the Army Headquarters, I was surprised to find several senior officers who during the liberation war had remained with the Pakistan Army in East Pakistan. One such officer was Lieutenant Colonel Feroze Salaudhin. He was one of the directors of *Razakars* during the liberation war, but he was cleared for the Bangladesh Army because he was Osmany's pet. Salaudhin was a subaltern in 1 East Bengal when Osmany was the commanding officer. His record of being a Director of *Razakars* was conveniently overlooked. He was now the Director of Welfare in the Army Headquarters. What welfare could the Bangladesh Army, which was almost entirely composed of freedom fighters, expect from him who only two months ago was doing his best to kill freedom fighters? If anything, he would be blocking all genuine welfare initiatives.

I could not help but feel pain at such blatant nepotism; the *Gono Bahini* was sent home with fifty rupees and a Director of *Razakars* was absorbed in the Bangladesh Army! What could be more ironic!

As the new Army began to take shape, it seemed that it was modeling itself after the Pakistan Army. Even the new insignia of the Bangladesh Army was the same as that of the Pakistan Army; only the crescent and star were replaced with the Bangladeshi *Shapla*. We had just created a new country. Its symbols and insignias should have reflected the spirit and aspirations of the liberation war, but regrettably that was not the case. Was this a simple case of intellectual bankruptcy or was it that the leaders of Bangladesh Army did not realize the full impact and ramification of our independence? We should have made a clean break with the past but in reality we were only trying to reinterpret and reestablish the Pakistani legacy in a Bangladeshi framework.

In Dacca, many politically connected people were scrambling to take over non-Bengali properties in the Mohammadpur and Mirpur area. Those who were higher up in the political totem pole chose properties in more posh neighborhoods such as Dhanmondi and Gulshan. Some clever freedom fighters with political and bureaucratic connections also got into the act; their number was rather small though. Some people even got multiple allotments; one in Dacca and the other(s) outside Dacca.

Even in its infancy, the government was looking after its party men under the guise of helping freedom fighters, and genuine freedom fighters who had actually fought in the trenches were left to fend for themselves.

Karim (2005) describes post liberation Bangladesh Society as being composed of three groups; the *Hajis*, the *Gazis* and the *Niazis*. The *Hajis* were those who crossed over to India after crackdown; *Gazis* were the freedom fighters and *Niazis* were those who did their best to stay out of trouble by either collaborating or remaining silent. According to Karim (2005), it was the *Gazis* who fared the worst in post-independent Bangladesh. He states:

*This paradox can be explained by Gresham's law in political economy, which is commonly stated as bad money drives out good money. In Bangladesh, fake freedom fighters drove genuine freedom fighters out of circulation from the first day of liberation, 16 December 1971.*



# 8

## Bangladesh

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Nineteen Seventy Two was the watershed year for Bangladesh. Decisions made during this year and the manner in which they were implemented would have long-standing consequences for the people of the newly independent country. There were difficult challenges ahead. With Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in the country, it was thought that the political wrangling within Awami League, witnessed during the liberation war, would be kept under control. Mujib was the ultimate arbiter of disputes within his party. In order to deal with the problems facing the nation, political leaders would not only have to demonstrate their sincerity and dedication but also wisdom. This was the time to heal and unite the population. It was also the time to lift the country out of the ravages of war.

On the one hand, liberation and independence created great expectations and unprecedented aspirations. These could easily turn into national despair. On the other hand, the reality was that the country was in dire straits; its treasury empty and its infrastructure destroyed. Road and rail networks were disrupted with all major bridges demolished, major seaports were unusable and the electricity network was in shambles. On top of all that, food stocks were depleted. The previous year, farmers were so overwhelmed with saving their own lives and the lives of their loved ones that they were unable to plant anything. For a poor agricultural country like Bangladesh, the nine-month liberation war meant most people did not have any earnings the previous year and whatever savings they may have had were now exhausted. In spite of these stark realities, the national sentiment

was upbeat. People were realistic; they understood the challenge and knew what was required of them. Everyone seemed prepared to share the national burden and contribute to the rebuilding of their country.

All eyes were on Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He was *Bangabandhu*, the friend of Bengal and the father of the nation for Bangladeshis. He was also the President of Awami League and the Prime Minister of the country. Governing Bangladesh at this point would be just as tough as the liberation war if not tougher. Mujib and his government were facing two types of problems. The first was to bring the country to its pre-war stage economically and socially. The other had to do with nation building so that the laws and national institutions reflected the hopes and aspirations of citizens of the newly independent country.

Mujib was a charismatic politician who had persuaded his compatriots to support his Six Points manifesto for provincial autonomy. The Bengali nation had voted overwhelmingly for him and his party. The election results were not accepted by the ruling Pakistani clique. This had led to the crackdown of March 25 and the subsequent liberation war. Mujib was in the pinnacle of his political career with no more political peaks to climb. He was surrounded by slippery slopes though and would need all the help he could get. Thus, his reign started with tremendous expectations and scanty resources. He would not be able to satisfy everyone; some people would inevitably be disappointed by whatever action he took. At the same time, if members of his party behaved in the same manner as they did during the liberation war, his problems would increase manifold<sup>1</sup>.

As if the problems mentioned above were not enough, there was yet another set of problems which did not get much attention in 1972. This was how to deal with the pro-Pakistani political elements. The *Mukti Bahini* (and its allies) had defeated the Pakistanis militarily but was the political battle won? Except for a

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986, reports that the Suhrawardy (Awami League) Government in Pakistan was the most corrupt government in Pakistan up until that point. If Awami League leaders did not control their avarice and indulged in the kind of corruption like some of them had during the liberation war, the Mujib Government would be burdened with the same problems that plagued the Suhrawardy Government.

few prominent collaborators who were in custody, the rank and file including the assassins of *Al-Badr* and *Al-Shams* had gone underground. If they were not defeated once and for all, it was only a matter of time before they would surface again with the help from their foreign patrons under the guise of 'saving Islam'. Khandakar Mushtaque and his cronies had tried their best to resuscitate Pakistan even in the closing days of the war. Mushtaque was in Mujib's cabinet in spite of his anti-Bangladesh and seditious activities during the liberation war. He was a shrewd politician and he had successfully used Serniabat, Moni and other prominent youth leaders to poison Mujib's ears against Tajuddin on the very first night Mujib returned to Bangladesh. In addition to political foes, the upper middle class who had acquired its wealth during the twenty four years of Pakistan rule would want a return to the old economic and social order.

On January 24, 1972, the government promulgated the Bangladesh Collaborator (Special Tribunal) Order to bring to book those who had collaborated with the Pakistan Army<sup>2</sup>. However, the Order was applied capriciously and only well-known political opponents and a few low level *Razakars* and collaborators were brought before the tribunal. As a matter of fact, the Collaborators Tribunals never got the resources they needed to do their job. The Establishment Division never appointed adequate number of investigators, prosecutors and judges. For some unexplained reason, the provincial civil administration was kept outside the scope of the Collaborators Order although there was nothing in writing to spare civil servants<sup>3</sup>. The erstwhile provincial administration which was now absorbed by the Government of Bangladesh created as many impediments as it could so that the Collaborators Tribunals did not function smoothly. Mascarenhas (1986) describes an event where a *Razakar* was being tried by a

<sup>2</sup> The Order was repealed on December 31, 1975 after the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman.

<sup>3</sup> The only task of the Provincial Government during the nine months of the liberation war was to assist the Pakistan Army in attaining its goal. The tools that the Pakistan Army used to attain its objective are described in Chapter Three which were genocide, rape and loot that is explicitly prohibited by the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. The provincial civil administration was involved in forming peace committees, raising paramilitary units such as *Razkars*, *Al-Badr* and *Al-Shams*.

Collaborator Tribunal. When asked to enter a plea, the defendant was reluctant. When prodded by prosecution and defense lawyers the defendant meekly stated pointing at the magistrate: "The person who occupies the chair is the one who recruited me as a *Razakar*. Now he has become a magistrate. It is a cruel twist of fate that I am in the dock and he is conducting my trial".

The world was watching how the Bangladesh Government was handling the challenges before it. President Tito of Yugoslavia saw problems in the way the government machinery was being set up by Mujib and expressed his concern. He sent an official delegation to convey his greetings to Mujib and the Bangladesh Government but the real purpose of the delegation was to convey Tito's apprehensions to Mujib. He urged Mujib to give patriotic freedom fighters the central place in the Bangladesh Administration. Tito even stated; "They may be inexperienced and make mistakes. But their hearts are in the right place. They will learn quickly and will push the country forward"<sup>4</sup>. Mujib did not heed Tito's advice.

Key collaborators found important positions in the new government and even the Prime Minister's Secretariat was no exception. Abdur Rahim, a former Inspector General of Police in East Pakistan and the Director General of *Razakars* during the liberation war was appointed as Secretary to the Prime Minister when *Razakar* peons were being brought before the Collaborators Tribunal leading to comical situations like the one mentioned above. Rahim was a graduate of the Phoenix Program conducted by the Office of Public Safety (OPS) of the CIA. The Phoenix Program's aim was to train law enforcement personnel of developing countries against possible communist insurgencies. The Pakistanis defined the liberation war as an insurgency by nationalist elements with left leanings. Rahim was trained by the CIA to deal with such situations and was therefore considered the best person to help the Pakistanis in raising, training and deploying the *Razakars*<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986.

<sup>5</sup> Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution*; London: Zed Press, 1979.

Another collaborator who found an important position in the Prime Minister's Secretariat was Mahbubul Alam<sup>6</sup>. Alam was the Dacca correspondent of the English daily from Karachi, Dawn. During the liberation war, he was characterized as a *Sarkari*<sup>7</sup> newsman by the Pakistani authorities to distinguish him from other Bengali journalists. Alam was known to be pro-Pakistani and the military authorities commissioned him to write scripts for *Plain Truth*, a propaganda program of Radio Pakistan against the liberation war. He received thirty to fifty rupees for each piece<sup>8</sup>. Alam was now the Press Secretary to the Prime Minister.

Freedom fighters saw the appointment of leading *Razakars* and collaborators in high places with great concern, alarm and disillusionment. Their pain was aggravated further by the fact that volunteers of the *Gono Bahini* were sent home with only fifty rupees although they were the people who had made the impossible happen; liberating their country from Pakistani occupation. While the government of the day did not retain them as National Militia, big time collaborators and enemies of the liberation war were being appointed to high offices in the Government of Bangladesh; they would determine the future course of the country. This was yet another irony. Many wondered if this was the end of aspirations generated by the liberation war. A Mujib biographer, M. R. Akthar (Mukul), states: "There is no parallel in the history of any country where after a protracted and bloody liberation war, the defeated bureaucracy and military officers were not only given continuity of service but were also accepted in the new regime with great respect while the patriots were excluded"<sup>9</sup>. Most political leaders of the day who mattered only gave lip service to the freedom struggle and to freedom fighters. They never embraced the struggle by making sacrifices themselves and their conduct after liberation indicated that they did not care about the fulfillment of aspirations the liberation war had engendered.

Bangladesh needed massive infusion of international assistance; the most important being emergency food aid because

<sup>6</sup> Mahbubul Alam is currently the editor of the *Independent*.

<sup>7</sup> *Sarkari* means government owned or government minded.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986.

<sup>9</sup> M. R. Akthar (Mukul), *Mujiber Rokto Lal*, Dhaka: Sagar Publishers, 1976.

of the break in agricultural production due to war. Even before dispatching the seventh fleet task force to the Bay of Bengal in December 1971, Kissinger was looking at alternatives other than military force to bring Bangladesh into the American orbit. His staff had prepared a detailed appraisal of Bangladesh's needs. USAID's assessment was that if Bangladesh received forty thousand metric tons of cereals every month the likely famine could be averted till spring. No ships were able to berth in Bangladeshi ports because of unusable navigation channels. It was in these consultations that Ambassador Johnson characterized Bangladesh as an 'international basket case' to which Kissinger responded that it was not America's basket case<sup>10</sup>.

Bangladesh was not yet a member of the United Nations whereas Pakistan was. Pakistan was preventing Bangladesh's entry in the UN through China which had vetoed Bangladesh's membership application. The territory of Bangladesh was still East Pakistan as far as the UN records were concerned. Hence, any relief operation by the UN could not have the name 'Bangladesh' on it. Consequently, the UN created United Nations Relief Operations Dacca (UNROD) for its humanitarian assistance in Bangladesh. UNROD launched the biggest relief operation to date that included men and material from more than twenty countries. The International Committee for Red Cross (ICRC) and several other charities such as Caritas, Save the Children, Christian Aid and War on Want joined UNROD in bringing aid to Bangladesh. The massive relief operation was coordinated by UNROD. It had its own wireless network, fleet of trucks, barges and even aircrafts. According to UNROD, ten million rural men and women and two million urban people were under the threat of starvation. Initially, UNROD was responsible for supply and distribution of food and there were no deaths from starvation in the period immediately after liberation. However, Gazi Gulam Mustafa, the President of Bangladesh Red Cross and the Chief of Dacca Awami League did

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<sup>10</sup> In May 1974, the Nixon Administration decided to stop food aid to Bangladesh because Bangladesh exported five million dollars worth of jute to Cuba. This was the Nixon Administration's retribution for not agreeing to the Administration's proposals in the Security Council Debates in 1971. Subsequently, the Ford Administration exempted Bangladesh from the Cuba trade embargo. See Muyeedul Hasan, *Muldhara* '71, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 1986.

not like UNROD (i.e., foreigners) distributing relief directly to the people of Bangladesh. He wanted the UNROD relief, especially food aid, to be distributed through the Bangladesh Red Cross. Mustafa's demand was not based on efficiency arguments but driven by corrupt motives<sup>11</sup>.

The Soviet Navy began the clearance of sunken vessels from Chittagong and Mongla ports in early 1972. It was a slow and tedious process and it took more than two years to open the navigation channels. Before the ports were cleared, ships had to unload their cargo in lighterage vessels before they could be unloaded in the jetties. This needed extra time and was adding to the difficulties in emergency food aid. The Indian railways were restoring the rail network by repairing tracks, bridges and the signaling system. Progress, however, was slow. The Indian Army Corps of Engineers were repairing road bridges. The repairs were temporary; bailey bridges were installed on destroyed segments. Permanent repairs would take several years. All repair work required equipment which Bangladesh did not have. Often, they had to be brought in from outside the country. By March, most of the ten million refugees who had taken shelter in India returned on their own and began to pick up the pieces of their lives with practically no assistance from the government.

The war had brought down industrial and commercial (trade) output by more than fifty percent. Pakistani businessmen abandoned their business enterprises in Bangladesh and fled to Pakistan. Seven hundred and twenty five industrial units were abandoned. These would have to be taken over by the state or divested<sup>12</sup>. The government established a Planning Commission with more authority than the Pakistani Planning Commission. Dr. Nurul Islam was appointed the Deputy Chairman<sup>13</sup>. The members

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<sup>11</sup> Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was aware of Mustafa's corruption and yet he did not do anything about it or remove him. In a public meeting, Mujib even castigated Mustafa and demanded to know why he (Mujib) did not get his blanket. Bangladesh had received so many blankets that every Bangladeshi should have gotten one for free as relief. The reality was that most of the blankets were pilfered and were either smuggled out or sold in the open market.

<sup>12</sup> S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> The head of government, the Prime Minister, was Chairman.

were Rehman Sobhan, Anisur Rahman and Musharraf Hossain; all academics and economists. They had earned Mujib's confidence by documenting the growing economic disparity between the two wings of Pakistan caused by government policy when Mujib was campaigning for Six Points. While they were capable researchers, none of them had any experience in management or in any entrepreneurial undertaking. They were obsessed with not creating a kind of free market economy like Pakistan where the proverbial 'twenty two families' controlled most of the country's wealth. They were in favor of wholesale nationalization of most economic activity including international trade by creating the Trading Corporation of Bangladesh (TCB), a government owned trading company<sup>14</sup>. Consequently, the public sector controlled more than eighty percent of productive assets.

Missing from consideration was the ability or lack thereof of bureaucrats to manage businesses and entrepreneurial undertakings that were taken over by the state. In effect, Bangladesh chose a centrally planned command economy that created a massive licensing regime which thrived on widespread corruption. What the country needed at that time was to put most people to work so that they could earn and look after their families. Given the size of the population and the state of the country, there was no way that the public sector could create sufficient number of jobs that was required at the time. The private sector had a very important role to play in pulling the country out of the ravages of war but those who made economic policies were too dogmatic to depend on the private sector for anything. If people had income and spent money, demand for domestic goods and services would rise and that would begin to move the economy in the right direction.

The EPR was re-named Bangladesh Rifles (BDR). It did not have any officers since officers in the EPR were seconded from the army. As the Bangladesh Army could not spare any officers, JCOs were running BDR and some of them were promoted to the rank of deputy directors to manage the transition. Since Victory Day,

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<sup>14</sup> The early employees of the TCB amassed enormous wealth through corrupt practices. Many former employees are some of the wealthiest people in Bangladesh today.



many *Mujib Bahini* personnel were housed in the BDR barracks in Peelkhana. This created apprehension that the BDR may be merged with *Mujib Bahini* or subordinated to it resulting in a clash between the two groups. It required Mujib's personal intervention to bring the situation under control.

On March 7, 1972, the government created the Jatiya Rakkhi Bahini (JRB). Its raising was given retrospective effect from February 1. Most of the recruitment was done from the ranks of the *Mujib Bahini* and *Kaderia Bahini*. They were trained by the Indian Army in Savar outside Dacca. Its officers were sent to India for training. Major General Sujan Singh Uban, the mentor of the *Mujib Bahini*, was the senior most Indian officer advising the government on the composition and training of this force. The JRB uniform was the same olive green as the Indian Army. Major Nuruzzaman, one of Mujib's co-defendants in the Agartala Conspiracy Case, was appointed as the commander of this force.

During the liberation war, RAW had anticipated problems with the pro-Chinese extreme left in the post liberation period. For that reason, or on that pretext, RAW helped the youth leaders to raise the *Mujib Bahini* in order to neutralize leftist insurgents in post liberation Bangladesh. JRB was to be a force similar to the Central Reserve Police (CRP) in India. The formation of JRB created more heartburn among freedom fighters of the Bangladesh Army for several reasons. The most important was that the *Gono Bahini* could not be absorbed as National Militia but the *Mujib Bahini* and *Kaderia Bahini* personnel were absorbed in the JRB. This was seen as an act of outright nepotism and discrimination.

Only those with political connections would be looked after, ordinary freedom fighters were left in the lurch to fend for themselves although their contribution in the liberation war was critical; without them, the *Mukti Bahini* could not have achieved what it had.

The JRB operated above the law; they detained people without warrants, and custodial deaths and torture were regular happenings as the JRB made its presence known to the country. At the instigation of Awami League leaders, JRB would often clash with the former members of the *Gono Bahini*. Many *Gono Bahini*

members were picked up and either killed or crippled for life.<sup>15</sup> Senior Awami League leaders such as Osmany and Khandakar Mushtaque Ahmed had JRB stationed in their constituencies to boost their personal political clout with the local population.<sup>16</sup> Within a very short time, the people of Bangladesh saw the JRB as the Awami League's *Gestapo*.

We were now into early summer. Rajshahi had become extremely hot with dry winds called *Lou* that got quite intense from midday onwards. The *Lou* brought hot sand grains from the shoals of the Padma which got into one's eyes and nostrils. Going outside during the day became difficult and we tried to remain indoors as much as possible. To keep ourselves cool, we would cover our windows with bed sheets that were attached to the window frame with thumb tacks. The bed sheets were splashed with water periodically so that the temperature inside was somewhat cooler.

We were busy raising 17 East Bengal. Major Gyasuddin Chowdhury was the commanding officer and Major Abdur Rashid his second-in-command. The rest of the officers were Murtee trained second lieutenants; five of us, all from Sector 7. I was adjutant and Amin quartermaster. We did not have any manuals to guide us through the raising process or even the necessary forms to requisition supplies from the Central Ordinance Depot (COD). We were able to find blank copies of these stationary from the papers and documents left behind by 32 Punjab in Zoha Hall. I found all this very disconcerting. I never understood why we had to use the old forms and procedures of the Pakistan Army. We were an

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<sup>15</sup> One such incident took place in Fulbari of Dinajpur District. Mansur Ali Sarkar, a recent master's graduate from Rajshahi University, was a *Gono Bahini* Leader. He along with some of his war time comrades were picked up by the JRB at the instigation of a political rival who had connection with senior Awami League leaders of Dinajpur. They were severely beaten and two were permanently crippled for life. These individuals would have probably been killed had the police not brought the matter to the attention of leaders of Muktijoudha Sangsad in Dacca who took the matter to highest levels of government. Even then, JRB filed a false case of weapon possession against the individuals and Mansur could not go abroad to study law even though he was admitted at the Lincoln's Inn.

<sup>16</sup> S. A. Karim, *Sheikh Mujib: Triumph and Tragedy*, Dhaka: The University Press Limited, 2005.

independent country and were raising a new army, so why couldn't we use the same forms and procedures we had used during the liberation war. All of us knew what those were! It seemed that there was quite a bit of inertia to go to back to the old ways of the Pakistan Army.

I couldn't help but ask myself if we were raising an army similar to the Pakistan army with a Bengali façade.

Our battalion was being moved to Saidpur to be a part of 72 Infantry Brigade. Saidpur was not a proper cantonment. It did not have proper barracks and essential facilities. The Pakistan Army had taken over a refugee colony built after the partition of India when many Muslims from eastern India migrated to East Pakistan. After the refugees found permanent housing, the old refugee colony was converted into a cantonment. 3 East Bengal was in Saidpur on 25 March 1971 when they were attacked by 14 Frontier Force and 23 Field Regiment Artillery of the Pakistan Army as they were sleeping. We were going to occupy the old 3 East Bengal lines. Some of the soldiers in our Battalion were from 3 East Bengal and these men had bad memories of that fateful night.

Saidpur was a major railway town. One of the largest railway workshops was located there. The railway employed a large number of *Biharis*<sup>17</sup>. During the liberation war, the *Biharis* sided with the Pakistanis. Many of them fought for Pakistan as members of EPCAF, *Razakars* or some other paramilitary force. After liberation, Saidpur had become a haven for the *Bihari* population of the northern districts. The local Bengali population felt considerable animosity towards them because of their collaboration. Islam (2011) reports that before the crackdown in Chittagong on March 25, 1971, the Pakistan Army placed armed military personnel in civilian clothes in *Bihari* neighborhoods<sup>18</sup>. These armed men attacked and even fired on demonstrating Bengalis during the civil unrest prior to March 25. When the EPR and 8 East Bengal revolted, the local population attacked the *Biharis* as retribution; there were many casualties including

<sup>17</sup> *Biharis* are people from Bihar. The term was used to describe Urdu speaking people.

<sup>18</sup> Rafiqul Islam B.U., *A Tale of Millions Bangladesh Liberation War 1971*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, Dhaka: Ananya, 2011.

deaths<sup>19</sup>. Similar events also took place in other locations. In Murtee, I had heard about the plight of *Biharis* in Bhairab Bazar during the resistance phase of the liberation war. I did not have any contact with the *Bihari* community during the war. The first time I had anything to do with them was at *Uposohor* in Rajshahi when we moved women and children to the jail for protective custody.

As the train approached Saidpur town, a strong stench of human waste hung in the air. The town's population had increased several folds as many *Biharis* from Rangpur, Shantahar and other areas of the northern region converged on Saidpur. The town was overcrowded and very dirty. There was garbage everywhere and the people looked hungry and scared. *Biharis* who worked for the railway workshop were not reinstated in their old jobs. Most did not have any means of earning a livelihood. They were completely dependant on relief agencies for their day to day needs. Children were the most vulnerable. Saidpur looked like a refugee camp. The affluent ones had left for India with the help of Indian Army personnel. Now, some Marwari businessmen were helping those who could pay their way out of Bangladesh. It was a sad state of affairs.

Before coming to Saidpur, we had collected as many abandoned Pakistan Army vehicles as we could from the Rajshahi and Natore area. It was quite difficult to arrange flatbed rolling stock for transporting these vehicles and the job was made more difficult because most of them were not working; they had to be towed. We were hoping to get at least half of them road worthy by cannibalizing parts from those that were beyond repair. It took us several days to load the train and even longer to unload and bring all the equipment to our lines in the cantonment.

The old 3 East Bengal lines were not occupied by anyone from the time the unit extricated from Saidpur. When we saw the old 3 East Bengal lines we were struck by the sight of the devastation; many of the buildings were dilapidated; weeds and tall grasses

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<sup>19</sup> After liberation, *Biharis* were registered with the International Red Cross (ICRC) for repatriation to Pakistan. All *Biharis* in Bangladesh opted for Pakistan. The number was around 250,000. Some Pakistani authors have tried to make the case that genocide on the Bengalis was prompted by Bengali attacks on the *Bihari* population. They conveniently forget the Larkana meeting and the decision taken by the generals and Bhutto about killing 3 million Bengalis. The relative casualties are so disproportionate that the comparison is a mockery at best.

covered the dingy individual refugee quarters. Most buildings were pitted with bullet holes; a reminder of that dreadful night when 3 East Bengal was attacked. The murdered soldiers of the unit were buried in several mass graves adjacent to the lines. Some of the survivors from that unit were in our battalion; it was distressing to see them cope with their grief. It took us nearly a month to clean up and even longer to repair the damaged buildings. Eventually, with a lot of hard work the place was made habitable.

There were two other battalions in Saidpur cantonment. Fifteen East Bengal raised from Sector 6 troops was there although they were moved to Rangpur a few weeks later. My course mates, Matin and Masud were in that unit as adjutant and quartermaster. Major Nazrul Islam was the Commanding Officer and Captain Sultan Shariar Rashid, a fellow escapee with Jahangir was the second in command. The battalion had an air force officer, Flight Lieutenant Iqbal Rashid. He fought the liberation war as an infantry officer.

The other unit was 10 East Bengal which was a part of 'K' Force during the war. My course mates Didar and Mizan were in this unit. They had fought in the Chittagong area and had been moved to Saidpur only a few weeks ago. Their wartime commanding officer, Major Jafar Imam was replaced by Major Danial Islam who had recently escaped from Pakistan to join the liberation war but could not because the war ended before his arrival. This was also the case for Second Lieutenants Faruk Khan and Sirajul Islam. Lieutenant Mukleshur Rahman, a former 3 East Bengal officer was the adjutant. Ten East Bengal also had three cadets from the Second Course that went to Murtee. They were not yet commissioned and were now attached to various units of the three wartime brigades. The cadets would complete the last leg of their training in Dacca.

It was really disturbing to see Lieutenant Kazi Bayzidul Islam in 10 East Bengal. He was a former officer of 32 Punjab, the unit that carried out the genocide in Dacca on the night of March 25/26. Islam served the Pakistanis loyally throughout the liberation war. After the gruesome killings on March 25/26, Islam was the person who read the Bengali announcements on the radio to the population in Dacca. 32 Punjab was moved to the Rajshahi area sometime after March and two of its companies including the

battalion headquarters were in Chapai Nawabganj. This unit fought against us in the battle of Chapai Nawabganj. Now, Islam and we freedom fighters were in the same army! I found this absurd and a cruel joke to say the least. What could be bigger collaboration than participating or assisting in the killing of Bengalis in Dacca on March 25? Who cleared him? Islam never revealed how he was cleared but it was not hard to guess. If the Director General of *Razakars* could be the Secretary in the Prime Minister's Secretariat, Islam was no aberration.

As the new Bangladesh Army began to take shape it did not seem that the senior officers leading the army gave any thought to what role the new army could play in the reconstruction of the war ravaged country. The only exception was Colonel Taher; the war injured Sector Commander who was now commanding the Comilla Brigade<sup>20</sup>. Taher did not want the army to be a burden on the national exchequer. He started an experiment where soldiers planted crops in cantonment lands for their own consumption. Taher's ideas also included reducing the gap that existed between officers and men during British and Pakistan times. He wanted opportunities of upward mobility for enlisted men so that the educated and capable ones could become commissioned officers. His peers, however, found Taher's ideas too radical. Consequently, they were not adopted by the army.

The looting spree that started in the capital and other parts of the country after liberation found its way into the cantonments. Colonel Ziauddin<sup>21</sup>, the Commander of Dacca Brigade, was disturbed by these happenings. He inspected the lines of his war time unit, 1 East Bengal, and brought out all the looted material found in the unit lines and piled them on the parade ground. He then lit a bonfire with all that to send a clear message to his command on how he viewed such activities<sup>22</sup>. On the other hand, a more clever method of amassing wealth was being practised by

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<sup>20</sup> Following the amputation of a leg in an Indian Army Hospital, Taher had returned to the country and was given the command of 44 Infantry Brigade. After he left the army, Taher ran the water truck division of the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Corporation (BIWTC) and secretly joined the Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD).

<sup>21</sup> After leaving the army, Ziauddin joined the radical leftist party, Purbo Banglar Shorbohara Party (PBSF).

<sup>22</sup> After the strong action taken by Ziauddin, people moved their looted articles, especially automobiles, outside the cantonment. However, the action did put a damper on such activities.

certain senior officers. Some of them were occupying abandoned residential property in the cantonment area and were surreptitiously having the titles changed to their own name or in the name of family members. In Chittagong, the Brigade Commander grabbed a huge tract of land beside the cantonment and had the title transferred to his name; he even put up a large sign board declaring his ownership.

Relatively young majors (and above) were getting command of battalions and even brigades in the new army as new units were raised. People who ran the army refused to take into account an individual's war and combat record. Those who had refused to fight during the liberation war were also given commands. One case in point was Major Nurul Islam (Shishu) who during the liberation war had refused to command a company in 2 East Bengal under Safiullah, now army chief, because he could not handle the stress of combat. Islam was appointed brigade major in Rangpur when Colonel C. R. Dutta took command of 72 Infantry Brigade from Wing Commander Khademul Bashar. After a while, Dutta was transferred to BDR as Director General and Lieutenant Colonel Shafayet Jamil took over the command of 72 Infantry Brigade. This created a tricky situation, since Jamil was four courses junior to Islam, his brigade major. The problem was resolved by promoting Islam to Lieutenant Colonel and making him Commander of the Comilla Brigade. This promotion and appointment surprised most freedom fighter officers in the army. How could a person who had never commanded a battalion (or even a company effectively) be appointed a brigade commander? The question on everyone's mind was on what basis was the army appointing its senior commanders?

No one in senior positions realized that such appointments were an affront to the fighting men who made up most of the army<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> If a soldier is not able to fight at a time of war because of fear then what good is he to the army? Why should he be given any command in peace time? Such individuals are simply not suitable for the army. Islam was not the only one although he was the only non-fighting brigade commander in the Bangladesh Army at that time. Maj. Gen. K. M. Safiullah, *Bangladesh at War*, Dacca: Academic Publishers, 1989, reports of the lack of grit and sheer incompetence of one Major Bhuyian. Yet, after taking over as Chief of Staff, Safiullah appointed Bhuyian as a battalion commander. Combat effectiveness was not going to be a consideration in the Bangladesh Army for command appointments.

We settled down in Saidpur struggling with shortages of all kinds. Peace time army was about training, sports and remaining busy with whatever your commanding officer wanted you to be busy with. As we were going through this process, I could see that some of the best fighters of the liberation war were either being sidelined or they were getting into difficulties with the military bureaucracy. Lalu, now Sepoy Lal Mohammad, the brave fighter who neutralized the first bunker in the battle of Chapai Nawabganj was getting into trouble because NCOs and JCOs found him to be either argumentative or undisciplined. As adjutant, these reports would come to me before it went to the commanding officer. I called Lalu and tried to find out what the problem was. Lalu's response was that he was being targeted because he was outspoken. To help him deal with this situation, I convinced Lalu to join the battalion boxing team and he agreed<sup>24</sup>. Within one year he became the Bangladesh Army heavyweight boxing champion. In his first match, he knocked out an experienced boxer in the first round. The following year he became the national champion and was promoted to Havildar for his boxing accomplishments.

The mess life in Saidpur was enjoyable; most officers were unmarried and we all lived in the same bachelor officers' quarters. Sometimes, the former Pakistan Army officers would regale us with stories of mess life in the good old days. It seemed many of them missed the life of the Pakistan Army messes and occasionally they demonstrated the old ways by yelling *Koi Hai*<sup>25</sup> as they entered the mess to get service. I found such demonstrations quite amusing. We would frequent the Railway Officer's Club to play billiards or use their swimming pool. The cantonment did not have such amenities. On weekends, we would go to places like Rangpur, Dinajpur and the surrounding areas. We made acquaintance with several members of the Irish relief organization,

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<sup>24</sup> Lal Mohammad lost his entire family in the genocide by Pakistan Army. Havildar Lal Mohammad was transferred to 22 East Bengal after 1975 which was after I left the battalion. A special Martial Law Tribunal hanged him for his alleged involvement in a mutiny in Bogra. The trial lasted less than 30 minutes and it was held in camera. Lalu did not even have a counsel to defend him during this so called trial and no appeal was allowed.

<sup>25</sup> "Is anybody there?" in Urdu.



Concern. They were running child feeding centers for vulnerable children in Saidpur, Dinajpur and Thakurgaon. Most of the volunteers were in their early twenties like us and one of them, an American called Irwin Shorr, was a high caliber tennis player who had played the US Open and Wimbledon. Sometimes, we played basketball with the Concern men.

By mid-summer, the government was overwhelmed with problems. It seemed to be fumbling in whatever measures it initiated. Anyone who wanted something from the government somehow found audience with the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister promised everyone everything without consulting the relevant department or ministry<sup>26</sup>. Soon Mujib became the only person making decisions for the Government of Bangladesh. Even trivial matters, such as the appointment of a peon would sometimes go to the Prime Minister's desk. As a populist politician, Mujib was given to making everyone happy who came to see him. In many cases, the petitioner's request was against the law or contrary to the policies of the government. The Prime Minister promised relief without being properly briefed. As a result, the wheels of the government machinery kept turning without any significant output; bureaucrats and even ministers would not make decisions unless they knew the prime minister's mind. Consequently, the new government failed to provide citizens the essential services it could have provided with available resources, adding to public dissatisfaction. For most citizens, the government machinery was unresponsive where bureaucrats resorted to archaic laws and regulations of the British and Pakistan era to deny citizens what they needed. Although this was the time when government officials had to be pragmatic and demonstrate initiative to help needy people. At the same time, clever bureaucrats with political patronage began amassing wealth from kickbacks in the new licensing regime.

Sometimes, Sector 7 freedom fighters, especially the ones from Dinajpur and Thakurgaon area would visit us in Saidpur. Some were on the run. They were framed with false weapons possession

<sup>26</sup> Most of these promises were not kept. See Anthony Mascarenhas, *Bangladesh: A Legacy of Blood*, Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1986.

charges by the thana police<sup>27</sup>. Most of these false cases were filed at the instigation of local politicians. We would have to give sanctuary to these old comrades till such time they sorted out their problems with the powers of the day. During these visits, we would hear stories of how members of Jubo League (many were former *Mujib Bahini* men) were targeting individuals with leftist revolutionary leanings for assassinations. A secret war of annihilation was going on in the countryside; both sides had considerable casualties. The worst areas were the villages of Pabna District and Naogaon Sub-Division<sup>28</sup>.

In Atrai (Naogaon Sub-Division), the followers of Abdul Haq and Mohammad Toha launched a movement with landless farmers against the well-to-do of the area<sup>29</sup>. The Atrai Movement was being led by Wahidur Rahman and Alamgir Kabir. Subsequently, Wahidur Rahman became a MP on an Awami League ticket in 1996 and Alamgir Kabir joined the BNP and became a state minister in Khaleda Zia's cabinet in 2001. The group had cached a large quantity of weapons in Atrai and was using them in an insurgency campaign to accomplish their goal of achieving an egalitarian society. This group targeted households who had rice stocks and demanded that half the inventory be given up for the landless and destitutes.

The Jubo League men tried to deal with the insurgents in Atrai with targeted assassinations but failed. Most of the Jubo League men who went to Atrai were killed. After this, the insurgents

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<sup>27</sup> Thana police means policemen stationed in police stations. By and large this group did not join the liberation war and collaborated with the Pakistan Army during the 9-month liberation war. In order to keep themselves safe from allegations of collaboration, they readily took unlawful dictates from local politicians and in certain occasions they pursued cases filed against the *Mukti Bahini* men during the liberation war; *Gono Bahini* members were hunted by thana police for cases filed by Peace Committee Members. In Pabna, such cases were kept alive till 1975 when Major Didar A. Husain of 10 East Bengal persuaded the Deputy Commissioner to withdraw all such cases because the government had already issued an order to this effect in 1972.

<sup>28</sup> The Pabna group was led by Tipu Biswas and the group in Naogaon was led by Wahidur Rahman and Alamgir Kabir. Rahman and Biswas were political rivals.

<sup>29</sup> The movement was along the lines of Tebhaga Movement where landless indigenous people had launched an armed struggle with bows and arrows against the established powers of the day. In the end, the Tebhaga Movement was crushed.

became bolder and attacked the police stations in the area. They captured four police stations (*viz.* Atrai, Taherpur, Bagmara, and Bhabaniganj) and looted their armories. After this incident, the government sent the army to Atrai. The mission was given to 72 Infantry Brigade and 10 East Bengal was tasked to get the job done. This was the first time the Bangladesh Army was called out to fight insurgents inside the country in independent Bangladesh. The intelligence agencies did not have any useful information on the Atrai insurgents. It took 10 East Bengal several weeks to develop an intelligence network as they patrolled the area extensively. Finally, they found the insurgent hideout and launched a 'hammer and anvil' operation to crush the insurgents. Several insurgents were killed. Rahman along with 10-12 insurgents were captured. Ten East Bengal's casualties were one dead and two injured; the company commander's wireless operator was killed and one of the injured was Cadet Ashraf Ud Dowla<sup>30, 31</sup>.

Some senior officers in the army were of the opinion that the Murtee Lieutenants needed more training to be suitable for the peace time Bangladesh Army although there was no question about our combat abilities. After the passing out parade of the Second Murtee Course in Dacca where the Prime Minister took the salute this view gained momentum. A Junior Officer's Course was organized for Murtee Lieutenants in the makeshift Officers' Training School (OTS) in Dacca which was now euphemistically called 'Battle School'. The principal idea behind this training was to straighten us out as is done with cadets through hazing and other punitive methods. The problem was that we could neither be treated like cadets nor could we be sequestered like them<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>30</sup> Ashraf Ud Dowla's leg had to be amputated in Rajshahi Medical College Hospital because he got gangrene. He subsequently joined the Foreign Service and retired as an ambassador.

<sup>31</sup> After the army left the area, insurgents again became active and the army had to go back in 1974 and clear the area for a second time. Alamgir Kabir was arrested by the army from a hideout in Rajshahi.

<sup>32</sup> Those who postulated additional training for the Murtee Lieutenants were quite unclear about the objective of the training; they only articulated that we should pass a saluting test that cadets go through in a military academy. Cadets, who do not pass the saluting test, cannot leave the academy premises. While they could train us in drill, they could not put us through a saluting test.

Most of us were delighted at the prospect of coming to Dacca for several weeks. It was like having a course reunion. A Battle School Student Officers' Mess was set up in a large abandoned residence in the Cantonment Bazar area where we were all put up. Colonel Ziauddin, the Dacca Brigade Commander, and a former instructor of PMA was the Commandant. He had led 1 East Bengal, his parent unit, with distinction during the liberation war and was the adjutant of the same unit during 1965 India-Pakistan war. The other instructors were the same officers who taught the Second Murtee Course in the OTS for their last leg of training.

The day started with drills for an hour followed by classroom instruction. A former drill instructor of PMA, Dafadar Major Mujib, taught us drill; something we did not have the time to learn in Murtee. As in any military academy, an attempt was made to teach us platoon level tactics in classroom discussions, although all of us had commanded companies in combat. This created interesting situations where we would often get into debates with our instructors. In many cases, the instructors were unable to make cogent arguments in support of their position. After the first week, instructors no longer discussed tactics and classroom discussions became chit chat sessions. After a while, even the chit chat ended as some instructors did not even show up for class. This was fine by us and we would go off to the city and be with our friends and family. As we settled down, those of us who were from Dacca did not even spend the night in the mess; we lived with our families and only showed up in the morning for drill and classes. The course turned out to be an enjoyable holiday.

Once or twice a week, Ziauddin would hold a lecture. Although the stated topic was some aspect of tactics but he seldom spoke on the topic. He mostly discussed nationalism and nation building, other national issues including the evolution of constitutional democracy and the rule of law. He also lectured on the role of the army in democratic Bangladesh. Ziauddin was a well read man and a good public speaker. I listened to his lectures with considerable interest and would sometimes ask him questions.

When Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was recuperating from a gall bladder surgery in Switzerland in August 1972, Ziauddin

published an article in the weekly *Holiday* titled 'Hidden Prize'<sup>33</sup>. Ziauddin accused the government of turning the independence "into an agony for the people". His main complaints were twofold: First, he said "after a liberation war, a new spirit carries and the country builds itself out of nothing. In Bangladesh the story is simply the other way around". His other complaint was that Bangladesh had secretly signed a twenty five year Peace Treaty with India without any discussion or even any mention of it in the parliament. Ziauddin's article had struck a chord with freedom fighters in the army and many agreed with him. Since liberation, they had observed with distress how the government failed to meet people's expectations either because of nepotism or sheer incompetence. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman rushed back to the country to deal with the issue. Ziauddin was produced before him and was asked to apologize. Ziauddin refused. Instead, he informed the Prime Minister that he had resigned and requested that his resignation be accepted. After Ziauddin's departure from the army, the Junior Officers' Course was wound up several weeks before the scheduled date.

According to Lifschultz (1979), the nucleus of Jatiyo Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) was formed by a group of students of Dacca University in 1962<sup>34</sup>. Sirajul Alam Khan was an important member of this nucleus. The JSD's position regarding the emancipation of the masses of East Bengal was different from other leftist parties. They felt that East Bengal had to be independent first before the proletariat revolution could be launched. The struggle for independence would be through a combined movement with other nationalist parties such as the Awami League. Thus, Sirajul Alam Khan along with his associates joined the Chhatra League where he rose to be its General Secretary. They existed within the Awami League as an independent and distinct entity although many viewed them as the most radical faction within Awami League. The members of this nucleus had brought tremendous pressure on Mujib to declare Independence in the race course on March 7, 1971.

<sup>33</sup> *Holiday*, August 20, 1972. Earlier, the government had arrested *Holiday's* editor, Enayetullah Khan for criticizing the government.

<sup>34</sup> Lawrence Lifschultz, *Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution*; London: Zed Press, 1979.

During the liberation war, Khan was an important member of the *Mujib Bahini* leadership. It is curious that Sheikh Moni, Tofayel Ahmed or Abdur Razzak did not figure out that Khan had his own plans once Bangladesh became free. All throughout 1971, the *Mujib Bahini* and top Awami League youth leaders were advocating against including leftist volunteers in the *Mukti Bahini*. At the same time, the *Mujib Bahini* chief Moni and his associates were getting ready to wage a secret war of annihilation on leftist groups. Little did they know that those who wished to launch a proletarian revolution and overthrow the Awami League Government after liberation were present within the *Mujib Bahini* itself. Not only that, Moni and his group, with help from Khandakar Mushtaque, had successfully driven a wedge between Mujib and his most astute associate, Tajuddin Ahmed.

In September 1972, JSD made its emergence in Bangladeshi politics with Major Jalil, the war time Sector Commander of Sector 9, as its President. The Chhatra League split with A. S. M. Rab and Shahjahan Siraj going with the JSD faction. JSD ranks were quickly bolstered because of the overall dissatisfaction. In addition to Khan's followers in the *Mujib Bahini*, many freedom fighters, workers, students and even some serving soldiers joined the new political party secretly. Thus, within six months of liberation, Mujib was challenged politically not by pro-Chinese leftist insurgents but from a faction of the Awami League that had existed within its ranks for a decade.

By the end of the monsoon in 1972, rice prices had more than doubled from their pre-liberation level. Price of other essentials was also beyond most people's reach. This coupled with no earnings because most people were unemployed only added to the hardship. Given the economic foundations of a centrally planned command economy, only the public sector could create jobs in 1972. Public Sector jobs went to the politically connected or those who doled out cash for them; meritorious ordinary citizens who should have gotten those jobs stood no chance. The massive relief materials that Bangladesh was receiving from abroad including food aid were being smuggled across the border. The BDR did not have officers and this resulted in poor border vigilance and widespread smuggling where the BDR often assisted the smugglers, many of whom had political connections.

Finding no other alternative, the government decided to call out the army in aid to civil power. Army units were deployed in anti-smuggling operations. Anti-smuggling operations require effective intelligence regarding smugglers and their modus operandi. The army did not have such intelligence. To be successful, the army needed intelligence which only the BDR or police could provide. In these circumstances 17 East Bengal was deployed to stop smuggling from Panchgarh in the north to Pirganj on the southern boundary of Dinajpur District. This was a huge area and we did not even have sufficient transportation to take us to the border. To make up for our transportation deficiencies, we had to depend on the district administration to requisition civilian vehicles. We also depended on them for fuel. An interesting situation developed in Thakurgaon, where the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) gave us gasoline vehicles but allocated diesel for them<sup>35</sup>. It seemed that civil administration officials did not take sufficient care in performing their duties; it was all about ticking off a box and going through the motions.

Anti-smuggling operations were quite frustrating. We would send out patrols every night and they would return in the morning without any success. The police and BDR intelligence did not give us any useful information. I suspect they deliberately fed us wrong information so that we were in the wrong place at the wrong time. This went on for a few weeks before we stopped depending on them for intelligence. As we spent more time in the borders, villagers started to provide us information. The kingpins who controlled smuggling seldom stayed in the border areas. They were operating from major towns. We then focused our attention on the bazars of major towns instead of targeting borders. Our information indicated that the big wholesale traders of Dinajpur were storing smuggled goods in their warehouses. We raided the big warehouses and recovered a huge quantity of Indian goods without import documents and evidence of customs duty being paid. The goods were confiscated and cases were filed against the warehouse owners. However, we could not find any stock of hoarded food grains.

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<sup>35</sup> The officer in Thakurgaon was Second Lieutenant Tajul Islam who later became a state minister in Sheikh Hasina's cabinet in 2009 and the SDO was Fazlur Rahman who retired as a Secretary to the Government.

When we interrogated the warehouse owners, one person gave us information about the people who were associated with food smuggling in Dinajpur district. All the smugglers were connected to powerful political leaders; the biggest ones were followers of Professor Yousuf Ali, a cabinet minister. This information helped us to make some big hauls of bullock cart convoys that were carrying rice across the border. The people we caught were poor bullock cart *wallahs* and not the fat cats who controlled everything. Elsewhere in Bangladesh, the army followed up on leads and arrested several individuals who were connected with smuggling of food grains and had links to political personalities. The government, however, was unwilling to take any action against their party people. The army was called off from the borders amidst a fiasco as the government did not have the will to take the perpetrators to task. I found this quite perplexing. The government was unwilling to take action against smugglers if they were from its own party whereas smugglers were bringing the government to its knees.

Anti-smuggling operations gave me the opportunity to see the government's field administration from close quarters. As a part of anti-smuggling operations, I had to visit various government offices in the district. It seemed that almost in every office, officials passed the entire work day chatting with political personalities while hundreds of poor people waited outside for something or the other. The overall lethargy was unbelievable. There were no friends of the people, only masters. Occasionally, political workers would make unlawful demands on the district administration and officials would comply without a whimper. During the HSC examinations, a loudspeaker system was set up outside the government girl's college which was an examination center. As the examination began, answers were dictated over the loudspeaker for everyone to hear and write. I was with the Superintendent of Police when this was happening. I asked him why did he not stop this farce and he replied that people who had set up the loudspeakers were from the government party!

A culture of impunity for the anointed was getting entrenched in Bangladesh.

On March 1, 1971, after Yahya had announced the postponement of the National Assembly, our demand for



provincial autonomy was immediately transformed into the demand for independence. Because of the rapidity with which events progressed, we never got the opportunity to have a national discussion on independence. On January 11, 1972, the day after Mujib arrived in Bangladesh, the Provisional Constitution of Bangladesh Order, 1972 was issued. Subsequently, on March 23, 1972, the Constituent Assembly of Bangladesh Order, 1972 stipulated that the country would have a parliamentary form of government and the Constituent Assembly would be made up with members of the National and Provincial Assemblies elected in the 1970 election. The day after the first session of the Constituent Assembly, a 34-member Rough Constitution Writing Committee was constituted with Dr. Kamal Hossain as the convener/chairperson. The committee invited proposals from different political parties, individuals and groups. They received 98 different proposals.

On October 11, 1972, the Rough Constitution Writing Committee submitted the 72-page Draft Constitution with 103 Articles to the Constituent Assembly. The Constitution embraced the noblest of values that appealed to the Bengali psyche. Mujib shepherded the draft through the Constituent Assembly and it was passed on November 4, 1972 and adopted on December 16, 1972. It was one of the most liberal constitutions of the time. The Constitution laid out nationalism, democracy, socialism and secularism as the four founding pillars of the state. It spelled out the fundamental rights and freedoms of the citizens of Bangladesh and also defined the structure and functions of the executive, judicial and legislative branches of the government.

The Constituent Assembly debated the Draft Constitution for less than a month before adopting it. The debate was not sufficiently exhaustive insofar as spelling out the relationship between the state and its citizens was concerned. Notably absent was any public discussion on the constitution. If we compare the Bangladeshi process with that of the USA, we shall note that it took the founding fathers of America almost a decade before the US adopted its draft constitution. The decade long debates thrashed out the relationship between the state and its citizens. When it was adopted, at the same time, the legislature passed the First

Amendment to the Constitution which is popularly known as the Bill of Rights. This did not happen in Bangladesh. Thus, there was no guidance on what sanctions the judiciary could impose on public servants and the government if the state violated citizens' rights. Thus, we had a Constitution that embraced noble ideas but the reality on the ground was such that its noble ideas could not be upheld by those who should have protected the provisions of the Constitution. In reality, the noble ideas enshrined in the constitution were not embraced by the powers of the day. This necessitated amendments and each amendment curbed the fundamental rights of the citizens of Bangladesh<sup>36</sup>. Hence, the noble ideas enshrined in the Constitution were never embraced in governance and even the puniest of the state's servants could violate citizens' rights with impunity. Such practices continue even to this day.

The Constituent Assembly was dissolved after the Constitution was adopted. A new election under the Constitution was scheduled for March 7, 1973. Over the past year, Awami League Government's performance left much to be desired and the general expectation was that Awami League would not be able to sweep the elections as it did in 1970. Nevertheless, it was expected to win an overwhelming majority of seats. In the pre-election campaigning, the opposition parties such as NAP (Bhashani) and JSD were drawing large crowds and the expectation was that there would be a vigorous opposition in the parliament which could only nurture the nascent democracy. Mujib, however, wanted a landslide victory and the Awami League bigwigs had made up their minds to get it at any cost, fair or foul.

The election results surprised most people; the Awami League won 291 seats out the 300 seats in the parliament. In several constituencies, the opposition candidate only lost the election in the last minute after leading all night. Prominent opposition leaders who lost in the last minute were Aaur Rahman Khan,

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<sup>36</sup> The Fourth Amendment passed on January 25, 1975 extinguished multi-party democracy that was one of the founding pillars of Bangladesh. This amendment also curbed the Supreme Court's jurisdiction over protection and enforcement of fundamental rights of citizens. See *Banglapedia. Volume. 3*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003.

Mashiur Rahman, Major Jalil, Shahjahan Siraj, Rashed Khan Menon, Muzaffar Ahmed, Suranjit Sengupta, Abdus Sattar and Mushtaque Ahmed Chowdhury. It would have made no difference if these individuals had joined the parliament and one could even argue that a vigorous parliament would dampen spirits for street agitation and action.

I was sent to Nilphamari for election duty where my task was to remain stand-by for dealing with law and order contingencies. It was an uneventful assignment.

With each passing day, the problems of Bangladesh seemed to be getting worse. The food stock situation was the most distressing. And people of the drought stricken areas in the northern districts were the most vulnerable. The anti-smuggling operation of the army did not yield the results it should have because of the government's reluctance to go after the fat cats who controlled smuggling. A train and several trucks carrying food grains were stopped on the way to their destinations and looted by hungry people. At some locations, even the police were attacked by angry mobs when they came to the aid of the truck drivers. The government finally decided to bring out the army to handle the emergency food transportation. The railway and food carrying trucks were put under the army's control and military escorts accompanied all trains and truck convoys. As far as track allocation was concerned, food carrying trains had priority over passenger trains. I was sent to Parbatipur for supervising food movement.

Parbatipur was a major transshipment point where goods and passengers were transferred from broad gauge trains to meter gauge trains and vice versa. Broad gauge trains from Mongla would come to Parbatipur under army escorts from Jessore Brigade units. In Parbatipur, broad gauge trains would be unloaded and reloaded in meter gauge trains under my supervision. The meter gauge trains would then be sent off to Kurigram, Gaibanda and other remote locations in northern Bangladesh. The army was trying to get food to the distressed as quickly as possible and at the same time trying to reduce the turn around time for trains and trucks. The empty trains and trucks would go back to the port/transshipment point under army escort

so that these would not be intercepted on the return journey and used for some other purpose. Moving food grains could not be delayed or halted for any reason.

Parbatipur seemed to be crowded with a large transient population. They had all come from the *Monga* region<sup>37</sup>. These people had run out of savings, food and luck. They were not beggars and did not know how to beg; most of them were families of landless tenant farmers. There were disproportionate numbers of women and children in this floating population. They slept under trees or in school yards or in the area around the railway station. Their movements were slow weakened by prolonged hunger and destitution. They flocked near eateries and family homes for leftovers. Most times, they were only offered *Maar*<sup>38</sup> and vegetable peelings. They were scavenging. It didn't seem anyone was offering them any real meals. They appeared like Bangladeshi refugees during the liberation war. In their tattered clothes and frail frames they looked pathetic. Surviving till the next meal was their challenge. No one could be more vulnerable than those in this predicament.

We established camp in the government *dak* bungalow premises in Parbatipur. On our very first day, while having breakfast in the verandah I noticed hundreds of people ogling over the boundary wall. They weren't demanding anything; they were just watching me eat. These were hungry people. I stopped eating outside as did my men. We decided to give out 100 *chapati-dal* sandwiches a day to the hungry from our rations. For the remainder of our stay, a huge crowd would gather in front of the camp from morning to receive *chapati-dal* sandwiches at noon. This was a difficult problem. So, we gave out the sandwiches on first come first serve basis allowing the first hundred people to enter the camp while the others were dispersed.

We would be intimidated over wireless when food trains would arrive. Before the arrival of the train, I would have the transshipment yard secured by armed guards so that no one could

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<sup>37</sup> *Monga* is an Urdu word now used in Bengali to connote scarcity of food, income and other essentials for survival. The Teesta belt area in northern Bangladesh is known as the *Monga* region.

<sup>38</sup> *Maar* is the starchy fluid that is drained after boiling rice.

come in or step out during transshipment. Once a food laden train arrived, the two trains would be positioned side by side and laborers quickly transferred grain sacks from one train to the other.

The first time I went to the transshipment yard, I saw hundreds of hungry people with blank expressions all around the place. We cleared the yard and established a perimeter cordon pushing people outside the cordon. During transshipment there would be some spillover; many sacks had holes in them and a few kernels fell on the ground. After the trains departed, we would leave the transshipment yard. As soon as we left, hundreds of people rushed in to pick up the few kernels that had spilled out. This happened several times a day for the entire month we were at Parbatipur.

Bangladesh was on the brink of a famine. The euphoria and aspirations engendered by victory and the liberation of Bangladesh had turned into national despair. I returned to Saidpur after the completion of my assignment with the overwhelming thought of how my fallen comrades would have behaved in battle if they knew that the poor people who had helped the *Mukti Bahini* at great personal risk would starve in an independent Bangladesh.

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## Album

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Author before his first birthday with his grandfather's *hookah*  
at Khaje Dewan: family home, Dacca, 1952



Author and his sister, Shikha, with their mother (*first from left*) and her  
friends in Hawke's Bay, Karachi, 1957.



Fazlul Huq House, Residential Model School, 1963.  
Sitting in chair (*sixth from left*): Major M M Rahman, Principal.  
Standing (*fourth from left*): Habibul Alam. The author is sitting on the  
ground (*first from right*).



Khan family portrait, Dacca, 1964.  
The matriarch of the family, the author's grandmother, sitting (*third from left*) in chair. The author's father is standing (*second from right*), and mother is sitting on the ground (*second from left*).





Bengali Officers of Pakistan Army after crossing into India through the Sialkot Border (mid 1971). (from left) Captain Salauddin Mumtaz, Captain Khairul Anam, Major of the Dogra Regiment, Indian Army; Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir and Captain Sultan Shahriar Rashid Khan.



Murtee, August, 1971. Sitting (from left): Sadeq Hossain, Khandakar Nurunabi, Mumtaz Ahmed, Mizanur Rahman (*Chacha*), Waliul Islam, Mohammad Ashanullah. Standing (from left): Sayeed Ahmed, Awal Chowdhury, Ashfaqus Samad, Indian Army Instructor, Indian Army Instructor, Indian Army Instructor, Mohammad Ali, Sheikh Kamal, Captain R P Singh, Sachin Karmakar, the author, Alik Kumar Gupta





Sector 7, Mukti Bahini F-Echelon,  
November, 1971.



Mohidipur Mukti Bahini Field Hospital, Operating Tent, November, 1971. (from left): Naila Zaman, Dr. Moazzem and two internee doctor volunteers of Sector 7.



Sector 7, troops marching to Rajshahi from Chapai Nawabganj,  
December 17, 1971.



Victory Parade Rajshahi. December 18, 1971, *(from left)* Major  
Gyasuddin Chowdhury, the author, FF Harun, Lieutenant Rafiqul  
Islam.



A section of the crowd in *Boro Maidan* after Victory Parade, Rajshahi, December, 1971.





Sector Commanders Meeting, December 1971.

Standing (*from left*): Major ATM Haider, Major Bahar, Major Abdus Salek, Major Abu Osman Chowdhury, Squadron Leader Hamidullah, Major Rafiqul Islam, Major Nuruzzaman, Squadron Leader Shamsul Haq, Major AT Salauddin, and Lieutenant Rouf. Sitting (*from left*): Lt. Col. Khaled Mosharrat, Lt. Col. Mir Shawkat Ali, Lt. Col. K. M. Shafiullah, Lt. Col. C. R. Dutta, Gp. Capt. A. K. Khandakar, Colonel M. A. G. Osmany, Wg. Cdr. Khademul Bashar, Brig. (Lt. Col.) Das of Indian Army, Lt. Col. Ziaur Rahman, Lt. Col. Kazi Nooruzzaman and Lt. Col. M. A. Manzur.

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# Annexures

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## Annexure A

TOP-SECRET

OPS-PLAN

### INTRODUCTION

1. The liberation war has gone on for last six months. It is time to assess the progress in the field, isolate and analyse failings and problems, if any, and work out plans to speed up progress of the war to achieve our goal of complete independence of Bangladesh within the shortest possible time. To enable us to draw up a viable plan it is essential to first study our achievements/failings as they stand today.
2. During the last six months progress in the field has varied widely and gone through phases of ups and downs. However, it can be broadly said that though we have inflicted a degree of damage on the enemy, it is far short of what we should have achieved. In fact, from the study of the sitreps a positive decline in our war effort and success becomes evidently clear.
3. Our effort in the field, for the purpose of analytical study can be broken up as follows:-
  - a. Raising of Bde and its ops- We have raised a bde with 3 East Bengal Bns. These Bns however, had only 50% or less of the original troops. Therefore, short fall had to be made up by milking troops such as EPR, Mujahids and Ansars from Sectors. This did not provide the standard of troops we required for regular bns. The bde started its training in the month of July and has been under training for 3 months. With this short training and shortage of offrs the ops efficiency of the bde can not be assessed as very high. In any case, without armour, it is incapable of launching major offensive and therefore, the thought of liberating a lodgement area and to hold it, is not practicable. For all this period, the bde has not been effectively utilised and cannot be utilised effectively in near future for the role it has been raised.

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TOP-SECRETb. Sector Troops

During early stage of the liberation war the sector troops were operating reasonably well. However, with the milking of best troops from the sectors for Bde, the effectiveness of the sector troops decreased significantly. Some of the EPR, Mujahids and Ansars who were left behind are old and have lost their usefulness as ops troops. In fact a number of them while going inside for ops have been indulging in loot, rape etc. Their ops, therefore, has been counter productive and has turned a large section of people, particularly in the border region where they have been operating, against us. The state of discipline of the sector troops is also very poor and is not conducive to the successful launching of ops. At best they can be utilised in defensive role provided they are not subjected to heavy enemy offensive.

Guerrilla ops

The guerrillas have been trained since the month of May, initially at the rate of 5 thousands per month. The figure is now 20 thousand per month, till to date approximately 13 thousand guerrillas have been inducted inside. However, the result expected of them has not been realised. In fact their performance has been disappointing. Some of the guerrillas are indulging in loot and other anti-social activities, some are sitting idle, some are carrying out very insignificant ops like cutting telephone lines and only 15 to 20 per cent guerrillas are carrying out proper operation.

Even the effectiveness of these guerrillas is negligible, because of lack of co-ordinated ops org and leadership. Another factor which has contributed towards the poor performance of the guerrillas is that the recruitment of guerrillas have not been carried out properly and therefore right materials have not been selected and trained.

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The selection of guerrillas has been indifferent. As a result there are large numbers of people who have joined only to have means of livelihood, or to get arms for anti-social activities or for self protection.

4. The Over all Result Achieved

From the above it can be seen the total force available at our disposal have not been operating effectively. Absence of an over planning and realistic allocation of priorities are some of main factors responsible for the above. The complete absence of contact between the forces HQ and the forces in the field is another factor which is in no less measure responsible for the above. At the present we are hardly killing any Pakistani troops and maximum efforts have been diverted in killing Rajakars or other civilians our own people. To set an example it can be mentioned that in Vietnam, Vietcong very rarely killed peace guards. They won them over. It will now take a major effort only to arrest this downward trend of our ops and therefore, necessitates an immediate review of the entire ops plan and to reallocate priorities if required, to be able to reverse this trend and to step up the ops to inflict the desired rate of attrition on the enemy.

5. Allocation of Priorities

In this war we have faced with an enemy who is very well trained, well equipped and resourceful. We will need a force of 15 Divisions of troops to be able to defeat the enemy in a conventional war. This is impracticable and needs no further consideration. Therefore, we have to have our war strategy primarily on the unconventional war. It is therefore, essential that the guerrilla ops is accorded the highest priority. Normally the guerrilla op starts with the nucleus of a handful of hard core dedicated men and the leadership automatically evolves over a period of time. We have to wage this war to a successful conclusion within a small time frame for obvious reason. In our case therefore, we have to induct guerrillas and the leadership.

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Considering the limited time available at our disposal, we will be able to achieve this by inducting our regular forces into coy Pl groups along with their commanders inside Bangladesh. This coy or Pl group will not have any firm base, but keep on operating exactly like guerrillas. With this hard core nucleus alongside, the other guerrillas will operate with greater confidence and under effective direction and control with the availability of Coy/Pl it will be possible to successfully take on larger tasks thus creating a sense of confidence both among the guerrillas and the local populace. This way, the guerrillas will be able to increase our area of influence, thus gradually liberating large areas without resorting to set piece conventional battle.

6. Recruitment

One of the pre-requisites of success of guerrillas ops is that the right material is trained and inducted. Only the most dedicated and motivated youths can provide this. It will, therefore, entail certain changes in our recruitment system. It has been experienced in the past that to recruit such large number of youths, employment of professionals are essential. It is not possible for our political leaders such as MNAs/MPAs to devote whole time for recruitment only. Therefore, it is necessary that enthusiastic and energetic people are employed to carry out the recruitment, properly and selectively.

7. Leadership

In spite of induction of bns inside we will still be short of leaders of guerrillas at various levels. We are expecting to receive approximately 60 offr in the last/week of Oct 71. These offr should be initially posted to the sectors, for gaining experience. After 2 to 3 weeks of ops in the sectors, most of these offr should be inducted inside to provide leadership.

In addition, volunteer and enthusiastic MNAs/MPAs and political workers should be trained in guerrillas warfare and inducted inside as guerrillas leaders.

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While the guerrilla will operate inside we must keep the border alive with ops so that the enemy is unable to pull out troops from the border for reinforcement inside against our guerrilla ops. Sector ops will ensure, besides causing damage and harassment to enemy, tying up of number of troops along the border. Because of the delay in launching of guerrillas, we have a large number of guerrillas still waiting to be launched. At any one time, we will have 15 thousand to 20 thousand guerrillas waiting on the border. If these guerrillas are used effectively as sector troops, the number of ops carried out would be large enough to inflict the desired rate of harassment and attrition on the enemy and will tie down a large number of enemy troops along the border and in fact drawing more from inside, as the war progresses.

8. Brigades

As the utility of Bde and Bns are very limited at present, these regular troops should go in Coy/Pl group to form the nucleus of guerrilla ops. These regular units, must be connected with wrls communication so that they can be regrouped in the shortest possible time. The wrls communication will also ensure proper coord of guerrilla activities.

9. Overall Plan

Overall plan should be to base our war strategy primarily on guerrilla ops. Nucleus and leadership of guerrilla ops should be provided by regular bns in Coy/Pl groups inducted inside. They will also direct and co-ordinate activities of the guerrillas.

Remaining gap in the leadership should be filled in by inducting the newly trained offrs and by trained MNAs/MPAs/Political workers. While the guerrillas will tie down large number of forces inside, the sector ops must be on full swing to ensure tying of a large number of enemy forces on the border. This will ensure wide dispersal of enemy in smaller strength thus offering small and weak targets to us.

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The regular forces operating inside as guerrilla should have wrls communication so that they are capable of concentrating large forces for ops inside and also to be able to regroup themselves into Bn for Bde for launching regular ops. In order to get the best material for successful ops inside recruitment must be carried out in close coord with the youth Camp org and through professionals whole time employed for this purpose. We are short of certain basic as well as sophisticated wpns. With some sophisticated wpns the guerrilla activities can be substantially stepped up. The fund raised by Bangladesh nationals abroad, should be immediately utilised to procure basic as well as sophisticated wpns at the earliest.

Notes:

1. Due to extreme confidentiality, the principal deed was prepared unsigned. The document was authenticated by the then deputy chief of staff Mr. Abdul Karim Khandakar.
2. To fit the pages of the principal deed with a book, the pages of it were cut into a shape. But the chronology of it was not interrupted in anyway. This is valid for all deeds.

Authenticated  
Signature

Illegible

A.K. Khandaker

Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh,  
General Administration Department

Dated 27 July, 1971

## ORDER

1. In pursuance of a Cabinet decision to streamline the field administration, it has been decided to set-up the following Administrative Zones with Headquarters & Jurisdiction noted against each.
  1. SOUTH-EAST ZONE (I): Sabrum :
    - i) Chittagong
    - ii) Chittagong Hill Tracts.
    - iii) Feni Sub-Dvn of Noakhali District.
  2. SOUTH-EAST ZONE (II): Agartala :
    - i) Dacca.
    - ii) Comilla.
    - iii) Noakhali Dist.excep. Feni Sub-Division.
  3. EAST ZONE: Dharmanagar :
    - i) Habiganj &
    - ii) Moulvibazar Sub Divisions of Sylhet District.
  4. NORTH-EAST ZONE (I): Dawki :
    - i) Sadar &
    - ii) Sunamganj Sub Divisions of Sylhet District.
  5. NORTH-EAST ZONE (II) : Tura :
    - i) Mymensingh
    - ii) Tangail.
  6. NORTH ZONE : Coochbehar :
    - i) Rangpur

7. WEST ZONE : Balurghat : i) Dinajpur  
ii) Bogra  
iii) Rajshahi
8. SOUTH-WEST ZONE : Krishnanagar: i) Pabna.  
ii) Kushtia.  
iii) Faridpur.  
iv) Jessore.
9. SOUTH ZONE : Barasat : i) Barisal.  
ii) Patuakhali.  
iii) Khulna.

Note: (1) The above Zonal Divisions have been made keeping in view that the people from the places noted against each zone have largely moved into the areas near about the zonal Headquarters.

(2) It may also be kept in mind that people from a particular district might have found their way into zones other than that in which that district is included. In such cases, they will belong to the particular zone in which they have temporarily settled themselves.

## 2. ZONAL ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL:

A Zonal Administrative Council will be established in each zone.

### CONSTITUTION OF THE ZONAL ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL:

- (a) All M.N.As. & M.P.As. of the zone will be the members of the Zonal Administrative Council
- (i) Ordinarily, an M.N.A. or M.P.A. will belong to the zone in which his district is included with a view to facilitating contact with maximum number of people belonging to his constituency and greater participation in the Liberation Struggle within his constituency.
  - (ii) It is, however, left to the convenience and discretion of the M.N.A. or M.P.A. to belong to a zone other than in which his constituency is included, in case he feels that by doing so the objective as enunciated in the foregoing para can be better achieved.
  - (iii) No M.N.A. or M.P.A. shall be a member of more than one Zonal Council.

- (b) Each Zonal Council will be headed by a Chairman, selected by the members of the Zonal Administrative Council from amongst themselves.
- (c) The Zonal Administrative officer will be the Member Secretary of the Council.
- (d) There shall be a Zonal Secretariat to discharge the functions to the Administrative Council.

### 3. FUNCTIONS OF THE ZONAL ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL

- (a) The Zonal Council shall ensure the implementation of the Policy enunciated by the Cabinet and will exercise Advisory & Political control over the administration.
- (b) Zonal Council will maintain constant contact with our people and make them feel the presence of Bangladesh Govt.
- (c) Zonal Administrative Councils will undertake relief work for the evacuees from Bangladesh in co-operation with local administration and other local agencies. They will also co-ordinate, organize and supervise the relief operations undertaken by the Bangladesh Government.
- (d) Zonal Council will keep watch on the Relief Camps and screen out undesirable elements/infiltrators.
- (e) The Council will provide logistic and administrative support to the Youth Camps.
- (f) The Council will keep close liaison with the Sector Commander and ensure close co-operation.
- (g) The Zonal Council will also take steps to set-up administrative machinery in the liberated areas within the zone.
- (h) The Council shall meet at least once a month. The Member Secretary will draw up the agenda of the meeting in consultation with the Chairman. At least a 5-day notice shall be issued by Member-Secretary for convening the meeting of the Council. Members may send proposals to be included in the meeting earlier to raise important issues in the meeting under miscellaneous subject.

4. SUB-COMMITTEES OF THE ZONAL ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL.

(a) The Zonal Councils will ordinarily constitute the following sub-Committees to facilitate the discharge of its functions:

(a) Finance Sub-Committee.

(b) Relief Sub-Committee.

(c) Health Sub-Committee

(d) Publicity Sub-Committee.

(e) Education Sub-Committee.

The Council may, however, if deemed necessary, constitute any other Sub-Committee subject to the approval of the Establishment Branch of the Cabinet.

(b) Each Sub-Committee shall consist of not less than 3 and not more than 7 members of the Zonal Administrative Council.

(c) The Members of the Sub-Committee will select a Chairman from amongst themselves.

(d) The Zonal officer representing the various departments will be the Member-Secretary of the corresponding Sub-Committee.

5. ZONAL ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER:

(a) Administrative set-up in each zone will be headed by a Zonal Administrative Officer.

(b) The Zonal Administrative Officer will be appointed by the Government.

(c) The Zonal Administrative Officer, who will be the ex-officio Member-Secretary of the Zonal Administrative Council, shall record the minutes of the meetings of the Council.

(d) The Zonal Administrative Officer will co-ordinate the work of all the Zonal Officers who shall be accountable to him.

(e) The Zonal Administrative Officers will keep close liaison with their local counterparts & extend all necessary co-operation and assistance to them.

(f) He will be responsible for executing the policies adopted in the Zonal Administrative Council.

6. ZONAL OFFICERS:

(a) Each Zone shall have:

- 1) One Zonal Health Officer.
- 2) One Zonal Education Officer.
- 3) One Zonal Relief Officer.
- 4) One Zonal Engineer.
- 5) One Zonal Police Officer.
- 6) One Zonal Information Officer.
- 7) One Zonal Accounts Officer.

(b) Zonal Offices will be appointed by the respective Departments of the Govt. and will be deputed to work in the Zones.

7. FINANCE:

(a) Financial matters in each zone will be managed by the Zonal Finance Sub-Committee.

(b) The Finance Sub-Committee shall consist of 5 members. The Chairman of the Zonal Administrative Council and the Zonal Administrative Officer shall be ex-officio member of the Finance Sub-Committee and the rest three members will be selected by the Council from among its members.

(c) Fund shall be operated through a Bank Account. Joint Account will be opened in the names of all the members of the Finance Sub-Committee and the same will be operated in the following manner:

Cheques will be issued by the Zonal Administrative Officer and will be countersigned by the Chairman of the Zonal Administrative Council or in his absence by any one of the other members of the Finance Committee.

(d) Necessary Funds will be released by the Govt. on monthly basis specifying allocations under each head of expenditure. Expenditure cannot be exceeded in any head without prior sanction of the Government.

(e) The Zonal Accounts officer will maintain proper accounts in accordance with the General Financial Rules of the Government by the Auditor appointed

by the Finance Department. A fortnightly statement of accounts shall be sent to the Finance Department to be placed before the Cabinet.

Signature Illegible  
Tajudiin Ahmed  
Prime Minister.

Memo No. GA/810(345)

Dated 27/07/1971

Distribution:

- 1) M.N.A. & M.P.A (All):
- 2) Head of Bangladesh Mission, Calcutta.
- 3) Secretaries (All):
- 4) Inspector General of Police.
- 5) Relief Commissioner.
- 6) Director General, Health Services.
- 7) Officer-on-Special Duty, Law & Parliamentary Affairs.
- 8) Chief Engineer.
- 9) Zonal Administrative Officers (All):
- 10) Private Secretaries (All):
- 11) A.D.C. to Commander in Chief.

Signature Illegible

(K.Ahmed)  
Dy. Secretary,  
General Administration Department



**Annexure C**

Extracts of the letter from South Western Regional Committee bringing a No Confidence Motion against Prime Minister Tajuddin Ahmed

Accorded and moreover, it has come to our knowledge that no such assurance or even indication therefore was given by India Govt.

We all are aware that taking NAP (2 groups) Communist Party and Congress along with Awami League a joint front in fact has been formed naming a consultative committee for the liberation struggle against the avowed policy of our leader Sk. Mujibar Rahman. On such vital matter even no opinion was taken from Awami League and the repercussion of the same in and outside the country is easily discernible. Reports were made to be published in Newspapers to Justify that 23 countries would accord recognition. No recognition has yet come from any quarter. It is also heard that a planning cell in the context of the present liberation struggle has been formed by the Prime Minister consisting of some persons. None of them is Awami Leaguer nor do they believe in the ideology of Awami League.

In the light of all these happenings the members adopted unanimous resolutions which are given in annexure "B". In the said adjourned meeting the Sub-Committee was once again requested to make another attempt to meet the Prime Minister and know the steps he was going to take in the light of the memorandum and resolution already submitted to him. The members also unanimously authorised the sub-committee to circulate the proceedings of both the meetings among all selected representatives for their due consideration.

Views were expressed by some of the members that they have positive information that India Govt. has been made to either entertain doubt on the oneness aims and objects of present Awami League's leadership in the struggle.

The sub-committee on 13<sup>th</sup> Sept., 1971 met the Prime Minister who assured to discuss the matter with the cabinet and than take up steps, if any, to be taken. We genuinely apprehend that the issue may be put to cold storage on so many pretexts. As per resolution of the meetings on 5/9/71 and 12/9/71 of our zone we are sending these for your due consideration and valuable decision at your earliest convenience considering the gravity of the situation.

Thanking you,  
Yours faithfully,  
Signature illegible  
Dated 10 October, 1971

## Annexure D

### Activities of the Government

So far the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh have been organised into the following Ministries/Departments.

1. Ministry of Defence.
2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs.
3. Ministry of Finance, Trade & Commerce.
4. Cabinet Secretariat.
5. General Administration Department.
6. Ministry of Health and Welfare.
7. Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.
8. Ministry of Home.
9. Relief & Rehabilitation Department.
10. Parliamentary Affairs Division.
11. Agriculture Department.
12. Engineering Department.

In addition, several autonomous bodies have also been organised outside the direct Government set-up. These are:

- (i) Planning Commission;
- (ii) Board of Trade & Commerce;
- (iii) Board of Control, Youth & Reception Camps;
- (iv) Relief & Rehabilitation Committee and,
- (v) Evacuee Welfare Board.

#### 1. Ministry of Defence:

Report on Ministry of Defence is being submitted separately. Three more functions of the Administration of Defence may also be noted.

- (i) Psychological war-fare cell-This is working in close co-operation with the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting.
- (ii) Medical Cover and welfare for the Niomito Bahini and Ganobahini-this is being done in close co-operation with the Ministry of Health.
- (iii) Institution of Gallantry Award for the Forces

2. Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

(a) Establishment of missions abroad at Calcutta, Delhi, London, Washington, New York and Stockholm.

(b) Diplomatic Drive abroad:

(i) Delegation to the United Nations:

(ii) Delegation to Afghanistan, Syria and Lebanon:

(iii) Delegation to Nepal; and,

(iv) Delegation to Ceylon, Burma and other South-East Asian Countries.

Good results achieved in some of the above mentioned countries.

(c) Intensive lobbying by Bangladesh nationals and sympathisers in the UK. USA, France, Sweden, Japan and a few other countries. Very favourable press coverage have been received in these countries. Funds have been collected abroad.

(d) Defection of Pakistani Diplomats-Ambassadors to Iraq, Philippines and Argentina switched allegiance. High ranking Diplomats in London, Washington, New York, Kathmandu and Hong Kong have declared their allegiance to the Government (apart from Calcutta and Delhi),

(e) Civil Service Officials under training abroad (seven in the USA and two in the UK) have also offered their services.

(f) External publicity has also been organised,

3. Ministry of Finance, Trade & Commerce:

The Secretary, Finance, is submitting his report separately. This Ministry has taken over and collected monetary resources brought over from Bangladesh. It has also prepared budgets and has been by and large, responsible for making payments to the various agencies and persons under different accounts. It has also introduced some sort of financial discipline. It has of late started collecting revenue on account of payments made to Bangladesh Government employees and agencies. According to a Cabinet decision the Government has instituted an inquiry commission to look into the question-and the resources brought over from Bangladesh and their handling.

#### Trade and Commerce:

A Board of Trade and Commerce has been organised as an autonomous body. This Board has already explored various possibilities of exporting Bangladesh commodities abroad not only as a source of income, but also as a measure of economic viability of Bangladesh.

The Ministry of Finance, Trade and commerce and the Board of Trade and Commerce have jointly held negotiation with the Government of India and the State Trading Corporation of India to work out the possible details of a Trade Agreements with India. They have also discussed the various fact of arranging transit facilities for the export and import of Bangladesh through India till such time the ports of Chittagong and Chalna could be used. Considerable progress has been made in those negotiations.

At the moment there is no secretary for Trade and Commerce Department. The Finance Secretary is looking after it.

#### 4. Cabinet Secretariat:

The Cabinet Secretariat has been organised with the Cabinet Secretary and a very skeleton staff under him. The Cabinet Secretariat is responsible for placing important matters before the Cabinet, for recording Cabinet decisions and circulating them, for following up the various decisions taken and also for any other matter that is connected with the Cabinet but does not fall strictly within the purview of any particular Ministry/Department. The President's Secretariat is also looked after by the Cabinet Secretary.

#### 5. General Administration:

A full-fledged Secretary for General Administration Department has been appointed from the beginning. He works directly under the Prime Minister.

This Department is responsible for all Establishment matters of the Government, such as, recruitment, appointment, posting, transfer, discipline, etc. The Department is also responsible for the execution of the Government policy in matters of public appointment. According to the Cabinet decision all Class I and Class II appointments under this Government are made by the Establishment Minister himself (that is the Prime Minister).

Manning of all Class I and Class II posts under the Zonal Administrative councils also come within the overview of this department. Maintenance of lists of officials and staff who have pledged their allegiance to the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, selection of personnel out of these lists, preparation of panels for recruitment etc. are done by the General Administration Department.

Zonal Administrative Councils:

The Establishment part of the Zonal Administrative Councils that is the offices of the Zonal Administrative Officers and other departments come under the General Administration Department. Filling up of Class I and Class II posts at Zonal Levels, budgetary sanctions for the offices etc. are also done by the General Administration Department.

Under the original scheme five Zones were created. The scheme has recently been modified and six more new Zones have been created. Selections have been held and the Chairmen selected in the following zones so far:

1. South-East Zone I.....Prof. N. I. Chowdhury MNA.
2. South-East Zone II .... Mr. Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury MPA
3. East Zone..... Col. M.A. Rabb, MNA
4. North-East Zone I.... Dewan Farid Gazi MNA
5. North-East Zone II.... Mr. Shamsur Rahman Khan MNA
6. North Zone..... Mr. Motiur Rahman MNA
7. West Zone I.... Mr. Abdur Rahim MPA
8. South-West Zone II.... Mr. Phani Mazumdar, MPA

The Zonal Councils have also elected their various sub-committees. Almost all the Zonal Councils have adopted resolutions high-lighting certain common as well as peculiar problems, Decisions have been taken in certain cases, but in others no decision has been taken because of broad policy implications. Government decision/action will be communicated to all Zonal Councils on their various resolutions as soon as selections in all the Zonal Councils are complete. Budgetary provisions have been/are being made for the Zonal Councils where elections have been held. Action is under way to release funds.

Necessary officers and staff for the Zonal Administrative Councils and also for the officers of various Zonal Level functionaries are being recruited and posted.

#### 6. Ministry of Health and Welfare:

The Health Secretary is submitting his report separately. Additional comments on the department are given below:

The Department was originally organised under one Director-General of Health. Later on, the Director-General was given the rank of Secretary to the Govt.

The Health side of the Department is being organized under two different categories, viz. (I) Medical cover for the Forces and (II) Civil Medical care.

(1) The Medical Care on the Defence side provides for the following.

- (a) Arrangement of Surgeon & Physicians;
- (b) Transports for carrying injured/dead bodies;
- (c) Medicines;
- (d) Surgical equipments;
- (e) Field Medical Units such as Advance Dressing Stations (ADS) and Main Dressing Stations (MDS).
- (f) Convalescence Homes: On the Welfare side for the fighting forces the following are being taken care of:
  - (i) Care for the dependents of the Shaheeds;
  - (ii) Pension/Subsistence for the completely disabled; and,
  - (iii) Provision of work for the partially disabled.

Necessary provision has also been made for the above purposes (rupees ten lacs).

On the civil side, necessary arrangements are being made to provide medical cover to Bangladesh citizens. An amount of Rs. 9,50,000.00 has been earmarked for this purpose.

The Health Secretary has also made arrangements for absorption of Bangladesh Doctors in various jobs. These Doctors have been engaged by the Government of India to look after the evacuee camps.

The Health Department is also responsible for collection of medicines and other equipments as donations from various friendly agencies and despatching them to the sectors on the basis of requisitions received.

The Health Department has also been entrusted with the duty of procuring equipments, ambulance etc. for the sectors in case of their non-availability from friendly sources.

#### 7. Ministry of Information & Broadcasting:

The Bangladesh Radio is one of the earliest organisations under the Government. Initially, the radio was installed under the direct supervision of Mr. Abdul Mannan, MNA. The staff for programming and broadcasting were selected from amongst the former Radio Pakistan who came over to us. Gradually, more and more artists and technicians have joined us resulting in improvement of the radio's output. By now almost 100 persons have been recruited for Bangladesh radio. Because of the presence of a large number of heterogeneous elements, it has been extremely difficult to regularise the services of all the Bangladesh radio personnel according to definite standard. Since radio is our most important information media and comes only second to our war effort in order of priority Government have always sanctioned necessary financial backing for it.

The other agencies organised under the information and Broadcasting Ministry are:

- (a) Director of Films;
- (b) Director of Publication; and,
- (c) Director of Arts and Designs.

As discussed above the psychological warfare Cell of the Ministry of Defence works in close collaboration with the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

The External publicity of the Government is at present located within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This wing has brought out a large number of publications in the form of booklets, pamphlets, brochures etc. These have played a very significant role in our foreign publicity.



A few eminent Bangladesh intellectuals have also published books and booklets covering a wide range of subjects projecting the Bangladesh cause and our struggle for freedom.

Recently a series of meetings were held with the Heads of information agencies under the friendly Government in order to further strengthen our publicity effort on all fronts. All necessary assistance has been promised and is forthcoming.

This Ministry has suffered from the beginning in the absence of an experienced person with necessary expertise who could be appointed as secretary. After waiting for a long time Government have very recently appointed Mr. Anwarul Haque Khan on a purely temporary basis to look after this department. He will work in close co-operation with Mr. A. Mannan, MNA.

#### 8. Ministry of Home.

This has now been organised under a full-fledged Secretary. Until recently the Inspector-General of Police was doing the main work of this department. Collection of information and its dissemination to various agencies involved is a important function of the Home Ministry.

The minister in-charge of Home is also responsible for the Zonal Administrative Councils. His Ministry performs the following functions, among others;

- (a) Administrative set-up in the liberated areas;
- (b) Issue of Travel documents; and
- (c) Enquiries.

#### 9. Relief & Rehabilitation Department:

This is organised under a Relief Commissioner who works directly under the Minister for Home and Relief. This department runs an office at Princep Street. It scrutinises various applications received for relief and helps Bangladesh citizens in special case. They are also organising Zonal Relief Offices within the framework of the zonal Administrative Councils.

This Ministry has organised relief to Bangladesh Teachers. A scheme for Camp-Schools utilising the services of the Bangladesh teachers for the benefit of evacuee camps children has also been drawn up and partly implemented with the help of the Bangladesh Teachers Association, of which Mr. Kamaruzzaman, MNA, is the Executive President.

#### 10. Parliamentary Affairs Division:

This is looked after by the Minister for Foreign Affairs himself. At the moment it is responsible for taking care of the problems of the elected representatives of Bangladesh.

#### 11. Agriculture Department:

This is yet to be organised. Only a secretary has been appointed who is now preparing a blue-print for agricultural development in free Bangladesh.

#### 12. Engineering Department:

A Chief Engineer has been appointed. Under him Zonal Engineers are also being posted to cater to the needs of the Sector Commanders. They will also be responsible for taking care of the engineering problems in the liberated areas.

##### (I) Planning Commission:

Government have recently organised the former Planning cell into a full fledged Planning Commission. Dr. Muzaffar Ahmed Chowdhury has been appointed as the Chairman of the Commission with the following as Members.

- (a) Dr. Sarwar Murshed
- (b) Dr. Musharraf Hossain;
- (c) Dr. S.R. Bose; and,
- (d) Dr. Anisuzzaman.

The Commission is now recruiting its own staff from amongst the Bangladesh intellectuals and technicians who have reported to Government.

The Commission have been entrusted with the following functions:

(a) To prepare a long term development plan for free Bangladesh on the basis of the Awami League manifesto and the objectives set down by the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and the Awami League High Command;

(b) To prepare a mid-term plan for reconstruction of the country and its economy. This plan will have to be fitted into the long-term plan; and,

(c) To prepare a short-term reconstruction plan, which will be necessary in the immediate future.

As the problem of reconstruction will be a gigantic one and the Government will be left with

no time to tackle these problems, we must be ready with all our plans and programmes right now. Planning, therefore, has assumed a real sense of urgency.

For the immediate reconstruction of the country the following problems will have to be taken care of:

- (a) Problem of rehabilitation of refugees;
- (b) Problem of accommodation for the displaced persons;
- (c) Food supply;
- (d) Restoration of Communication;
- (e) Restoration of normal facilities, such as health, electricity, water, hospitals etc.
- (f) Commissioning of damaged ports, Factories Industrial institutions etc;
- (g) Restoration of law and order;
- (h) Restoration of educational facilities;
- (i) De-mobilisation of the Armed Forces as far as possible and arranging education for the youth now under Arms;
- (j) Commencing Bank and Insurance and other financial Institutions according to the avowed policy of the Government for nationalising them;
- (k) Restoration of Trade and Commerce; and,

The Planning Commission is also tendering expert advice on relevant subjects to the Government from time to time.

Co-operation with friendly institutions in matters of planning:

A series of discussions were held earlier with Mr. D.P. Dhar. Recently Dr. S. Chakravarty of the Indian Planning Commission also came here and held detailed discussions with the Acting President, Prime Minister and the Planning Commission. Various fields of co-operation and mutual assistance in the matter of planning were discussed. Services and facilities have been offered also.

## (II) Board of Trade & Commerce:

This has already been covered under the Ministry of Commerce.

(III) Board of Control, Youth & Reception Camp:

This Board is headed by Prof. Yousuf Ali, MNA, According to the re-organised structure the Youth Camp Directorate come under the Ministry of Finance. The Prime Minister has delegated the function of looking after the Youth Camps to the Home Minister, who discharges this responsibility with the help.

Reception Camps:

There are now as many as 24 Youth Camps and 112 Reception Camps, and (list enclosed). The requirements of the youth and Reception Camps are now being taken care of by the Board on the basis of the budget approved. Training facilities for the Youth Camp units have also been organised on a large scale. Regular induction of boys from the Youth Camps into the Guerrilla forces is also being made. Essential items for the Youth such as, beddings, woolen garments; blankets etc. are now being taken care of both by the friendly agencies as well as by our own institutional arrangements.

(IV) Relief & Rehabilitation Committee:

This is headed by the Home Minister and is responsible for looking after the Bangladesh evacuees.

(V) Evacuee Welfare Board:

This is yet to be organised. Only a Chairman has been appointed.

The Following three Associations have also been organised by Bangladesh citizens outside the Government Periphery:

- (a) Bangladesh Red Cross Society,  
(Dr. Ashabul Haque, MPA).
- (b) Bangladesh Teachers Association,  
(Mr. Kamaruzzaman, MNA).
- (c) Bangladesh Volunteer Service Corps,  
(Mr. Aminul Islam, MNA).

Signature Illegible

(H.T. Imam)  
Cabinet Secretary,  
Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

**Annexure E**

Govt. of the People's Republic of Bangladesh  
Establishment Division

Memo No. Estbt.DVn./3179(19)

Dated: December 16, 1971

From : M. Noorul Quader,  
Secretary, Establishment Division  
To : The Deputy Commissioner

Subject: Immediate tasks for Deputy Commissioners

1. The Civilian Administrators posted by the Bangladesh Government will face a tremendous task on assumption of their post. The entire administrative as well as economic structure has been shattered during the war with the enemy and these will have to be restored before development activities can start. On the positive side, there is a tremendous upsurge of public enthusiasm which should be properly tapped and channelled towards speedy reconstruction. The administrators must keep this in view and enlist active co-operation and support of elected representatives, the freedom fighters and all other sections of the people.
2. Amongst other tasks, the following should be given top priority.

A) RESTORATION OF LAW AND ORDER:

During the course of liberation struggle, law and order machinery had broken down. The aim of the Govt. is to restore the Rule of Law as speedily as possible. For this, the magistracy and the police have to be put back in their proper position as the law authority for maintenance of Law and order. The Deputy Commissioners must take the following immediate steps:

- 1) Post magistrates in each thana and also see that the S.P. takes steps to adequately man the police stations.

- 2) Put an end to summary execution of collaborators and criminals. For this, full support of elected representatives, political workers, freedom fighters and the people in general will have to be enlisted. It will also be necessary to arrest collaborators as speedily as possible.

B) RE-FUNCTIONING OF GOVT. OFFICES.

The Govt. has already made an announcement asking all employees to return to their posts. Except for those who openly collaborated with the enemy, Govt. servants will be allowed to continue in their job subject to subsequent screening. The measures to be taken in this regard are enumerated below:

- I) Announcements will be made locally asking all employees of Govt., Semi-Govt. as well as private organisations to immediately return to their job. On return, they should intimate the fact of their re-joining to you.
- II) Employees, who openly collaborated with the enemy, shall be taken into custody. For this, you should exercise your judgement after consulting local people.
- III) Appointments and postings wherever made by the Bangladesh Govt. supersede orders made by the occupation Govt. Incumbents of posts which have been filled up by the Bangladesh Govt. shall continue to work. Persons appointed by the occupation Govt. against these posts will become officers on Special Duty.
- IV) Employees who had left their posts but did not get employment under the Bangladesh Govt. have been asked to resume their previous posts. Appointments made to these posts by the occupation army stand cancelled. Such employees shall remain officers on Special Duty until further orders.
- V) Where appointments have been made by the Bangladesh Govt. to posts whose incumbents had left their jobs and abstained from serving the occupation Govt., the officers appointed

by the Bangladesh Govt. shall assume charge of the office while the earlier incumbents shall join as officers on Special Duty.

C) RESTORATION OF ECONOMIC LIFE.

It is essential that normal economic activities are restored as speedily as possible. At the same time, a correct assessment of the assets and liabilities of Banks etc. and also, of properties left by enemy nationals and collaborators would have to be made. It is immediately necessary to ensure that these properties are not looted or destroyed. The following action in this field are to be taken:

- I) All treasuries and banks will cease to hold transactions with immediate effect pending issue of further instructions by the Govt. cash, gold, other valuable articles etc. in the Treasuries and Banks should be verified, sealed and their safe custody ensured by posting of adequate guards in the premises. Verification Report should be sent to the Govt. without delay.
- II) Industrial Establishments, factories, shops and other properties of the enemy nationals and absentee collaborators should also be sealed. Where conditions permit and the Dy. Commissioners so deem expedient, stops may be taken to run any of the above establishments by appointing suitable Administrators. In other cases; the employees should be asked to remain in readiness so that the establishments can be put to commission immediately on receipt of Govt. directives.
- III) People will be encouraged to re-open all other factories and shops as quickly as possible. Hospitals, dispensaries, Municipal services, etc. should also be resumed forthwith.
- IV) Steps should be taken for providing irrigational facilities by use of power pumps, etc.

D) RESTORATION OF COMMUNICATION:

Restoration of communication is a matter of Top-most Priority. Without this, all other activities of the Govt. will suffer. Please take the following actions.

I) All telephones and telegraph services should be revived. Messenger and courier system has also to be used systematically. You should also try to take advantage of wireless sets of the armed forces whenever possible.

II) Road and Rail Communication has to be restored. For this, officials of these departments should be contacted and whatever action is possible taken. Also inform Govt. of your requirements in this regard.

III) Great emphasis should be laid on river communication.

E) RELIEF AND REHABILITATION:

Systematic supply of relief and rehabilitation of refugees and other displaced persons will be of paramount importance. Without this, restoration of normalcy will be difficult, if not impossible. Actions to be taken in this regard are as follows:

I) Designate personnel at thana level to look after refugees and displaced persons.

II) Check position of food grains in Govt. godowns.

III) Appeal to people to maintain peace and order and to go back to their respective houses in an orderly manner.

IV) Elaborate orders in this regard will be issued by Govt. soon. In the meantime, all possible assistance may be given as interim measures.

F) ESSENTIAL SUPPLIES:

There is likely to be shortage of food, kerosene, salt, sugar, mustard oil and many other items of essential supplies. Govt. is looking after this problem in a broad based manner. For the interim period, take the following actions:

I) Make an assessment of the existing stock of these items and take measures for proper distribution.

II) Take measures to prevent hoarding and black marketing.

III) Furnish your requirement to Govt. for the next three months.



Lastly, I would again emphasize the need for working in full co-operation with elected representatives, political workers, freedom fighters and the public in general. The task before you is of tremendous magnitude and a concerted effort of all sections of the public is necessary to accomplish it.

A preliminary report covering all aspects should be sent to Govt. at the earliest. Detailed report should follow soon after.

Signature Illegible

(M. Noorul Quader)  
Secretary,  
Establishment Division

<b>Annexure F</b>
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GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH  
CABINET DIVISION

Extract from the Decision of the Cabinet Meeting  
held on 23.12.71 at Dacca in the Bangabhaban.

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Subject: AGENDA NO. 1: "ABSORPTION OF THE MEMBERS OF THE  
GANO BAHINI IN THE NATIONAL MILITIA"

During consideration of the summary the following points  
were made:-

- (1) The Home Secretary reported on the latest law and order situation.
- (2) It was suggested that the deployment of force must be according to orders.
- (3) A unified command for guerrillas is required.
- (4) The Allied Force Commander, who is responsible, for command of the Mukti Bahini should also be requested to enforce discipline.
- (5) While discussing the Law and Order situation it was pointed out that only the following categories of persons should be arrested:-
  - (a) Political leaders who collaborated with the enemy to suppress the People's liberation war.
  - (b) Individuals who committed crime against humanity in collaboration with the enemy.
  - (c) Member of such organisation as "Al-Badr" "Al-Shams" etc.
  - (d) Witnesses of case against Bangabandhu.
  - (e) Dr. A.M. Malik and his Cabinet Members.
  - (f) Officials and other collaborators now in the Cantonment in the custody of the allied Army or in their protection.

### DECISION

The scheme for the absorption of the members of GANO BAHINI in the National Militia was approved with certain modifications. The revised scheme for the establishment of the National Militia as approved.

- (1) A National Militia will be formed immediately and all freedom fighters, whether enlisted or not, brought within its fold.
- (2) Camps will be established at each subdivision for the guerrillas of that area. The camp will be organised to provide the requisite training for utilising these youths for reconstructional work.
- (3) Camps at the sub-divisional level will be the point of assembly of all guerrillas within that area.
- (4) A Central Board for the National Militia will be constituted with a total number of memberships not exceeding eleven. There will be two advisors to the Board from the Allied Command one from the Mukti Bahini and another from the Mitra Bahini. The members of the Board will be nominated by the Government.
- (5) There will be a sub-divisional Board for the National Militia at each of the Sub-divisional Headquarters. The total membership of the Sub-divisional Board will not exceed eleven. The members will be nominated by the Govt.  
  
There will be two Advisors to the Board from the Allied Command one from the Mukti Bahini and another from the Mitra Bahini.
- (6) Each camp shall have a magazine to store, to keep records and to maintain arms in usable state.
- (7) The training syllabus should be so designed as to train these boys for the following roles:-
  - (a) To form the second line of defence of the country.
  - (b) To be useful whenever so specifically required for the restoration and maintenance of law and order.
  - (c) For various functions, directly contributing towards the reconstruction work of the country.

(8) A large number of these guerrillas had suffered during the liberation war because of unhealthy accommodation, substandard food and absence of any pay and allowance. Particular attention will therefore, be paid for their food, accommodation and allowance.

(9) The scales of payment for guerrillas was as follows:-

Rs.60/- per head per month if no rations was supplied

or

At this scale the monthly expenditure for 80,000 guerrillas will be as follows:-

(a) Pay Rs.50/- X 80,000 =Rs.40,00,000/-

(b) Food Rs.30/-X 80,000 =Rs.24,00,000/-

(c) Contingency Rs.5000/- =Rs. 2,65,000/-  
per camp (53X500)

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Total=Rs.66,65,000/-

(10) Since many guerrillas are likely to go back to their studies or previous vocations, a lump allocation may be made.

The Cabinet further decided that the decision regarding the formation of the National Militia should be in the form of an announcement giving certain specific decisions regarding utilisation of the members of the Mukti Bahini (including Gano Bahini) in National reconstruction, National Defence, People's Police Force, Education etc. A draft announcement would be submitted by the Cabinet Secretary and published after the Prime Minister's approval. A copy of the announcement made on 26-12-71 is enclosed.

It was further decided that a Cell would be created in the Ministry of Defence to work out absorption of the members of the Gano Bahini in the National Militia and in reconstructional activities according to the requirements of various agencies.

Signature Illegible

(Syed Nazrul Islam)  
Acting President

## Annexure G

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

### ANNOUNCEMENT

The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh places on record, on behalf of the entire population of the Country and the Government itself, its deep sense of gratitude and profound thanks to all members of the Mukti Bahini (Regulars and Gono Bahini). The patriotism, courage and valour shown by the members of all the fighting forces, collectively and individually are unmatched. The sacrifices made by our valiant freedom fighters and the blood and sweat of all those who have fought in the war of liberation have not gone in vain.

The battle for freedom has been won. But we are now facing a much more serious challenge. We must now launch the battle for reconstruction of the Country. Not only that the economy should be quickly re-built and normalcy restored in all spheres of life, but a new era of building the country must start forthwith keeping in view the cherished goals of the Nation. We must at once start working for the establishment of democracy, rule of law, secularism and socialism. This is a tremendous task which can only be achieved through the same sense of patriotism, sincerity, dedication, hard work and sacrifices that all of us, particularly the freedom fighters have shown in the war of liberation.

The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh therefore, appeals to all the members of the Mukti Bahini to channelise all their energy and efforts to the building of a new society. The following steps are being taken by the Government immediately to achieve these goals.

For the preservation of the independence of the country and protection of its territorial integrity we need a regular army, an air force and a navy. We are proud of our officers and troops who have fought as regular units in the war of liberation. But their number is not adequate. We need more officers and men for the regular battalions. We have an excellent source of manpower in the Gono Bahini. They are already battle hardened.

However, they need formal training. Arrangements are being made to recruit officers and men from the Gono Bahini. A National Defence Academy will be set up shortly to train the new officer cadre and others for the Defence Forces. Selection Boards will be formed shortly for the purpose of selecting Commissioned and Non-Commissioned Officers. The Government sincerely expect the heroes of the war of liberation to provide leadership for the new Army, Air Force and Navy of Bangladesh.

There is an urgent need for protecting the lives and properties of the citizens. We cannot reconstruct and build a new order without peace and discipline. We have fought for democracy and for the establishment of Rule of Law. Shahids have laid down their lives to uphold the principles of democracy and democracy has no meaning if we cannot protect the individual liberation of our citizens. We must now behave in an orderly and disciplined manner and maintain law and order. Law abiding citizens must be protected. Offenders must be punished but only through a due process of law. Those who waged war against our State and committed atrocities on our people must also be punished. They will be tried. We, therefore, need a judicial system, an administration and a police force to help protecting individual lives and properties.

The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh have decided to establish a new Police Force. This will be a people's Police Force and not an instrument for coercion and repression as it used to be formerly. Such a People's Police Force can only be properly manned and officered by people drawn from our heroic Gono Bahini. Government have thus decided to select Police Officers and Police men from amongst the Gono Bahini members. Selection Boards for these purposes are being set up shortly.

To reconstruct our beloved country with the utmost speed and then to harness all available resources (material and manpower) for achieving our national objectives we must develop necessary skills. For the purpose of preparing plans and drawing up blue prints for progress we need a large number of trained teachers, economists, statisticians, engineers, architects, doctors technicians and all kinds of skilled manpower. The

savage enemy attempted to decimate the cream of our society - the intellectuals who could lead us on to the paths of progress. We have lost many valuable lives. Not only must we recoup this loss, but acquire new skills in every spheres of development. The ravages of the war must be cleared within the quickest possible time so that we can start building our new society without delay. The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh feels that the Mukti Bahini is the best reservoir of talents which can provide a new kind of motivated leadership for the reconstruction of the country, rebuilding its economic infra-structure and achieving progress at the quickest possible rate. The Government intends that the members of the Mukti Bahini, particularly those who had to leave their studies to participate in the liberation war, should develop proficiencies in all fields of national development. Keeping these factors in view the Government have decided to offer all opportunities to those freedom fighters, who would like to enrol themselves in educational institutions to complete their education and training, particularly in the Engineering University, Engineering Colleges, Medical Colleges, Polytechnic Institutions and other technical centres. Government is also contemplating to set up new technical institutions all over the country.

Those who have completed their studies will be immediately absorbed in suitable posts.

For the implementation of the policy enunciated above it is necessary to embody all the freedom fighters, whether enlisted or not in a National Militia.

The scheme for the establishment of the National Militia will be as noted below:-

- (1) A National Militia will be formed immediately and all freedom fighters, whether enlisted or not, brought within its fold.
- (2) Camps will be established at each subdivision for the guerrillas of that area. The camp will be organised to provide the requisite training for utilising these youths for reconstructional work.
- (3) Camps at the sub-divisional level will be the point of assembly of all guerrillas within that area.

- (4) A Central Board for the National Militia will be constituted with a total number of membership not exceeding eleven. There will be 2 Advisors to the Board from the Allied Command one from the Mukti Bahini and another from the Mitra Bahini. The members of the Board will be nominated by the Government.
- (5) There will be a Sub-divisional Board for the National Militia at each of the Sub-divisional Headquarters. The total membership of the Sub-divisional Board will not exceed eleven. The members will be nominated by the Government. There will be 2 Advisors to the Board from the Allied Command one from the Mukti Bahini and another from the Mitra Bahini.
- (6) Each camp shall have a magazine to store, to keep records and to maintain arms in usable state.
- (7) The training syllabus should be so designed as to train these boys for the following roles:-
  - (a) To form the second line of defence of the country.
  - (b) To be useful whenever so specifically required for the restoration and maintenance of law and order.
  - (c) For various functions, directly contributing towards the reconstruction work of the country.
- (8) A large number of these guerrillas had suffered during the liberation war because of unhealthy accommodation, substandard food and inadequate pay and allowance. Particular attention will, therefore, be paid for their food, accommodation and allowance.

Approved  
Signature Illegible  
Tajuddin Ahmed  
Prime Minister of Bangladesh  
26.12.71



## Annexure H

SECRET

Phone: 281512

Meeting No CM-3/71.....

GOVERNMENT OF THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH  
CABINET DIVISION

### ***Decision of the Cabinet Meeting***

held on the 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1971, at 5-30 P.M. at Dacca  
in Bangabhaban.

Subject: Agenda No.4- Constitution of Boards under  
National Militia Scheme.

#### MINUTES

The following points were made:-

- (i) It was suggested for consideration of the Cabinet that all those Forces like the Mukti Bahini or the Mujib Bahini or the workers of the Communist Party etc. may be represented in the Central Militia Board.
- (ii) It may not be practicable or feasible to ensure representation of each of these Forces at each level, particularly at the lower level.

#### DECISION

The Cabinet approved the following constitution of the Central Militia Board:-

- (1) Moulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani,
- (2) Mr. Moni Singh,
- (3) Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed,
- (4) Mr. Monoranjan Dhar,
- (5) Mr. Tofayel Ahmed M.N.A.,
- (6) Mr. A. Razzak, M.P.A.,
- (7) Mr. Ghazi Ghulam Mustafa, M.P.A.,
- (8) Mr. Rafique Uddin Bhuiyan,
- (9) Capt. Sujat Ali, M.N.A.,

- (10) Home Minister and
- (11) Defence Minister.
- (ii) Defence Minister will act as the Chairman of the Board and the Defence Secretary will act as a non-Member-Secretary of the Board.
- (iii) Requests should be made to the Headquarters of the Eastern Command, Indian Army, and Headquarters of the Bangladesh Defence Forces for nominating one person each to the Central Militia Board.
- (iv) All notices and proceedings of the meeting should be sent to the Acting President for his information.
- (v) At the Sub-divisional level Sub-divisional Militia Board will be constituted by the Central Militia Board.

Signature Illegible  
Syed Nazrul Islam  
Acting President.

## Annexure I

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh

Minutes of the meeting of the Central Board for National Militia held on 6<sup>th</sup> January, 1972 in the office chamber of the Prime Minister.

Member Present:-

- (1) Mr. Tajuddin Ahmed, Prime Minister.
- (2) Mr. A. H. M. Kamaruzzaman, Home Minister.
- (3) Capt. Sujat Ali, M.N.A.
- (4) Mr. Tofayel Ahmed M.N.A.
- (5) Mr. A. Razzak, M.P.A.
- (6) Mr. G. G. Mustafa, M.P.A.
- (7) Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed.
- (8) Mr. Moni Singh.
- (9) Mr. Surendranath Bhattacharjee
- (10) Mr. Ruhul Quddus, Secretary-General.
- (11) Brig. Anand Sarup- Adviser from Mitra Bahini.
- (12) Lt. Col. Khaled Mosharraf - Adviser from Mukti Bahini.
- (13) Mr. A. Samad, Defence Secretary.

1. The Prime Minister opened the meeting welcoming all the member to the first meeting of the Central Board. He then referred to Government announcement on National Militia and explained the reasons for formation of the same. While expressing satisfaction over the quick restoration of normalcy, he emphasised that complete sense of security amongst the public will return only after all the irregular fighters now living in small groups are collected in Militia camps and after the members of Razakar, Al-Badr and Al-Shams Bahinis have been combed out and taken into custody. The Prime Minister reiterated the decision of the Government to recruit personnel for the Armed Forces, the Police, the Border Security Force and also other Government jobs from amongst the qualified and willing members of the Militia. The necessity of bringing all the irregular freedom

fighters, whether enlisted or not, under a unified command was also highlighted.

2. Mr. Moni Singh expressed satisfaction over the formation of the Advisory Board. He was, however, of the opinion that representatives from two students groups EPSL and EPSU should also be taken. He also suggested that instead of having members by name, respective parties should be allowed to nominate their own representatives. He advocated that Government should collect all arms by issuing an order fixing a time limit. After the Militia has been organised, Mr. Moni Singh continued, a drive should be launched to collect arms from unauthorised persons, and holders of such weapons should be penalised if they do not surrender their arms voluntarily.
3. Mr. Surendra Nath Bhattacharjee expressed his agreement with the idea of formation of National Militia and stated that it is the duty of the Government to provide food and shelter to these freedom fighters. Mentioning certain countries, he stated that at the initial stage, the Militia is needed for restoration of law and order and reconstruction. Mr. Bhattacharjee expressed the view that all arms must be collected immediately and no one should bear arms unless on specific duty. He was also of the opinion that the elder generation has the responsibility of setting an example of social service before the young fighters.
4. Capt. Sujat Ali, MNA, stated that these young fighters want to know about their own future, their future role in the country and also to see that the ideals for which they fought are achieved. He pointed out that arms had been supplied through some specific sources and there are lists of persons to whom the arms were issued. Once these lists are collected, it should not be difficult to locate the holders. Members of Razakars, Al-Badr and Al-Shams Bahinis can also be singled out and identified on this basis. He was of the view that it would be easy to collect arms if a procedure is laid down. He mentioned that, in his area, the freedom fighters have already been organised in Platoons or larger groups, their arms are being kept in a central 'Kote' and these arms are

issued only on duty. He was of the view that camps at thana level would have been better than at Sub-divisional level. He also emphasised that teams should go out immediately to recruit personnel for various services, and assistance should also be given to the students, who want to go back to their educational institutions. He also stated that in the present situation, these boys can play a vital role in economic and social reconstruction.

5. Mr. A. Razzak, MPA, agreed that the young fighters must go to the Militia camps and that complete normalcy cannot be restored unless the armed fighters are restricted to camps. He emphasised that camps should be established forthwith and provision of food be made. He informed that there are reports even now of formation of guerilla units and urged that immediate steps be taken in this regard. Mr. Razzak advocated that arms should be collected in a planned manner. He was also of the view that command of the National Militia should be given to political leaders since most of the freedom fighters were politically motivated.
6. Prof. Muzaffar Ahmed emphasised that firm and speedy action against the collaborators is necessary for return of sense of security in the minds of the people. He agreed with the suggestion of Mr. Moni Singh that representatives of EPSL and EPSU should be included, as it may be difficult to tackle the students without taking their leaders into confidence. He was also of the opinion that representatives from parties should be allowed, if the party members designated by name is not able to attend. Prof. Ahmed asserted that the present strength of the Police is not sufficient and immediate recruitment should be made to fill up the gap.
7. Mr. A.H.M. Kamaruzzaman, the Home Minister, state that the freedom fighters had fought for realisation of an ideal. While forming the National Militia, this ideal was kept in mind and the objective of the Government is to canalise the enthusiasm of the younger generation into the task of reconstruction. He further stated that arms should be collected without creating dissatisfaction amongst the

freedom fighters, who were our children and younger brothers. He further stated that for administrative reasons, it would be difficult to collect boys at Union, Thana level. He asserted that Government will take action against those who refuse to report at the Militia camps. As regards camp management and command and control, he was of the view that these functions would be better discharged by Army personnel, who have training in this field. As regards including representatives of EPSL and EPSU, the Home Minister stated that this question will give rise to demands from various other groups and this is not advisable. He requested the members to accept the present representation.

8. Mr. Ghazi Gholam Mustafa, MPA, informed the meeting that Razakar and Al-Badr members are still raiding houses in some areas and they are spoiling the good name of Mukti Bahini. He emphasised that bringing of the freedom fighters to the Sub-divisional camps is necessary to eliminate the Razakers and Al-Badr Bahini members speedily.
9. Brig. Anand Sarup, representative of the Mitra Bahini, stated that bringing the guerrillas to a central place is the prime necessity and this should be done at the Sub-divisional level, as it is not possible to look after the boys at Thana level. He also stated that, if necessary, a National Cadet Corps can be organised later on the College level under which the youth will be trained in their respective educational institutions. On the point of command and control, Brig. Anand Sarup was of the opinion that there should be one command.
10. Col. Khaled Mosharraf, Adviser on behalf of the Mukti Bahini, was of the opinion that the command should be given to Army Officers, who are trained in this type of work and who can discharge the function more effectively.
11. Capt. Sujat Ali, MNA, further state that the freedom fighters can be kept at thana level initially and then gradually brought to The Sub-divisional HQs. He was of the view that freedom fighters should not be withdrawn till dacoits and anti-social elements are controlled.

12. There was general discussion on the formula according to which the Sub-divisional Boards would be constituted.
13. The Prime Minister closed the discussion thanking all the members. He emphasised that the success of the scheme would depend on co-operation of all.

#### DECISIONS

- (1) The overall responsibility for management of the camps shall vest in the Sub-divisional Board. The senior most Army Adviser will be the Camp Commandant, who would function under the direct supervision and control of the Chairman of the Board.
- (2) The Sub-divisional Boards will be constituted as below:-
  - (a) Maximum 5 members from amongst the elected representatives;
  - (b) DCs in the HQ Sub-divisions and SDOs in other Sub-Divisions.
  - (c) Not more than 5 public leaders connected with the war of independence.

The Prime Minister shall nominate members of the Sub-divisional Boards.

- (3) Four members will form the quorum for meeting of these Boards.
- (4) The Chairman of the Sub-divisional Boards shall be elected by the members.
- (5) The Following announcement will be issued by the Government:

#### PRESS RELEASE

In a Press Release the Government of Bangladesh has made it clear that maintenance of law and order is the responsibility of the civil authority and they alone will take action in the event of violation of law and order or breach of the peace. The civil agencies have also been ordered to take action against collaborators and criminals speedily.

All offenders will be tried under due process of law and no one else should try to administer justice. No arrest, search or seizure of property

including houses or vehicles shall be made except by the civil police or agencies specifically authorised by the Government.

Government has called upon members of the public in the event of coming across of collaborators or offenders, to keep watch and inform the civil police for taking action. No irregular freedom fighter irrespective of party, political or group affiliation shall come out with arms in public unless they are detailed for duty at the request and in aid of the civil authority.

Signature Illegible

Tajuddin Ahmad

Prime Minister

6.1.72



<b>Annexure J</b>
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Photocopy and Transcript of the Flash Message from  
Major General M.I. Karim, Commander 6 Armoured  
Division to the Chief of the General Staff, 18  
December 1971

From: Maj. Gen. M.I. Karim, GOC 6 Armoured Division, personal for Lt. Gen. Gul Hassan Khan. All my formation commanders categorically state that they and their officers and men have lost complete faith in the present government and army leadership. They state that they and their troops will not take up arms against the people to protect the present regime. In case of resumption of hostilities will not fight under present military directive. To preserve integrity and cohesion of country and army absolutely essential immediate change be effected in regime and military leadership. Government must be handed over to leaders acceptable to the people. Events causing acute dissatisfaction among officers and men and situation fast deteriorating.

Message Ends

## Annexure K

Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh  
Extracts from the Minutes and Decisions of the Cabinet  
Meeting held on December 13, 1971.

AGENDA NO.2: Trial of Collaborators.

The Cabinet considered the summary on the subject "Trial of Collaborators" and after due deliberation decided as follows:

- (a) An announcement should be made forthwith to the effect that a machinery of justice is being established for the trial of collaborators and that pending trial all alleged collaborators should be protected and that private retribution must be prevented.
- (b) The recommendations contained in the summary on the subject "Trial of Collaborators", submitted by the Secretaries' Committee, were accepted as noted below:
  - I) Tribunals will be formed for different categories of collaborators.
  - II) An announcement should be made through radio and other media of communication that local authorities under the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh have been authorised to arrange immediate arrest and safe custody of collaborators pending trial.
- (c) The subject "Trial of collaborators" should be immediately examined in details by a Committee of Jurists and legal experts, who will advise the Government, particularly on the following matters:
  - I) Whether new law should be drafted to give legal form to the recommendations made to the Cabinet by the Secretaries' Committee or this should be done within the framework of the existing law. If the law on the trial of collaborators is to be framed according to the existing law/laws, under the provisions of the Proclamation of Independence Order date April 10, 1971 and the laws Continuance Order

date April 10, 1971, how should it be fitted therein.

II) Whether the offence of collaboration should be given precise definition or it is covered sufficiently by the existing law dealing with such crimes as waging war against the State, sedition, murder, loot, arson etc.

III) What should be the composition of the tribunals or Special Courts?

IV) What category of persons should be tried?

V) What other allied factors are to be considered and brought within the legal framework?

(d) The Committee of Jurists and legal experts should be immediately constituted by the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs and further necessary action should be taken by that Ministry. If necessary, the Ministry of Law and Parliamentary Affairs may ask for the services of legal experts from the Government of India.



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